



Haruki Kuou

Illustration by
konomi

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Liar, Liar

The Lying Transfer Student

Is Targeted by the **Little Devil**



A detailed illustration of a young woman with long, flowing pink hair and heterochromatic eyes (one red, one blue). She is wearing a dark blue school uniform with a pink scarf and a blue plaid skirt. She is holding a large, ornate key with a blue gem. The background is filled with floating pink and blue gems, gold coins, and a small treasure chest in the bottom left corner. The overall style is vibrant and anime-inspired.

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C O N T E N T S

Liars & Devils

The Lying Transfer Student Is
Targeted by the Little Devil



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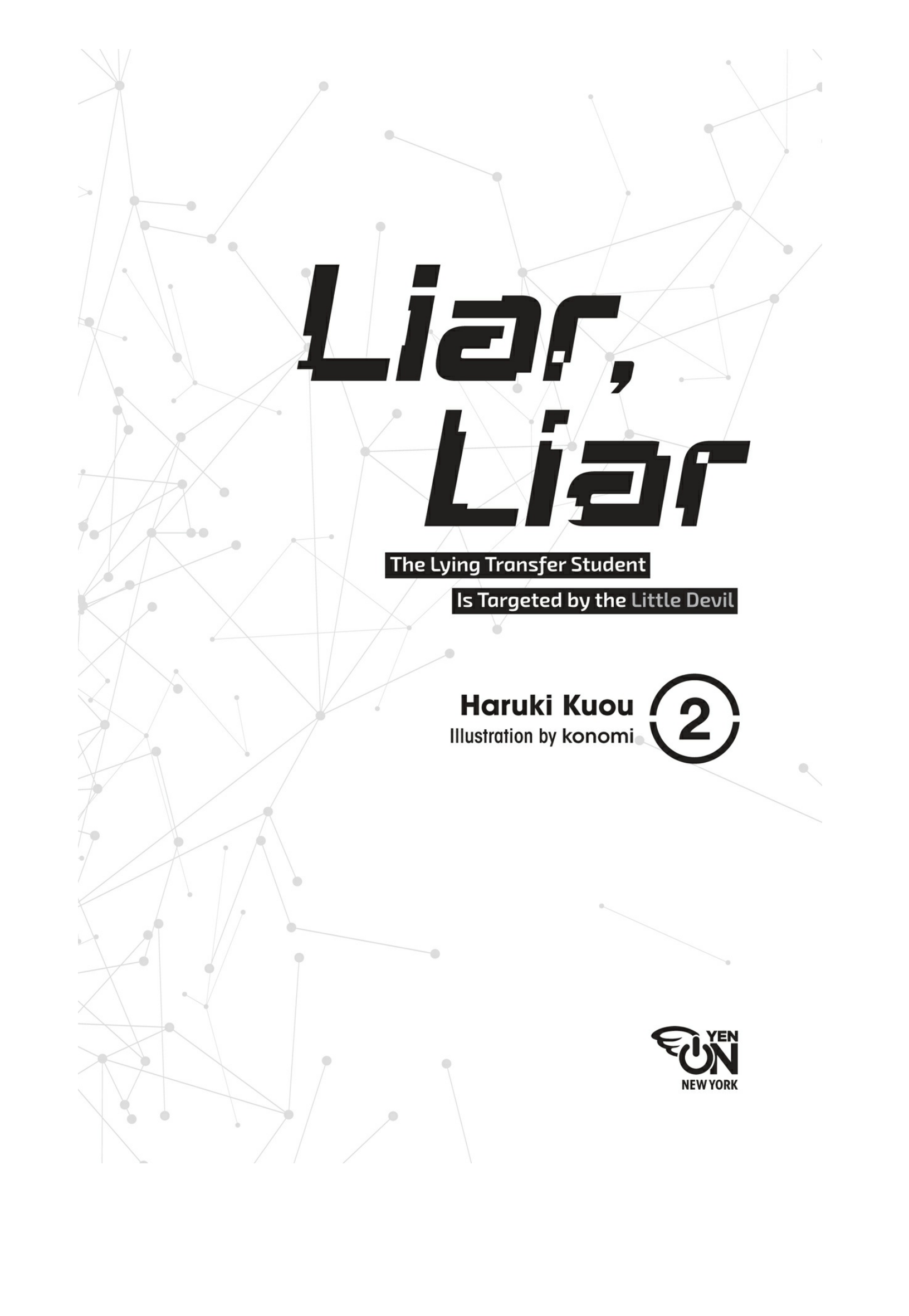
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NEW YORK

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Liar, Liar ②

The Lying Transfer Student Is Targeted by the Little Devil

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by konomi

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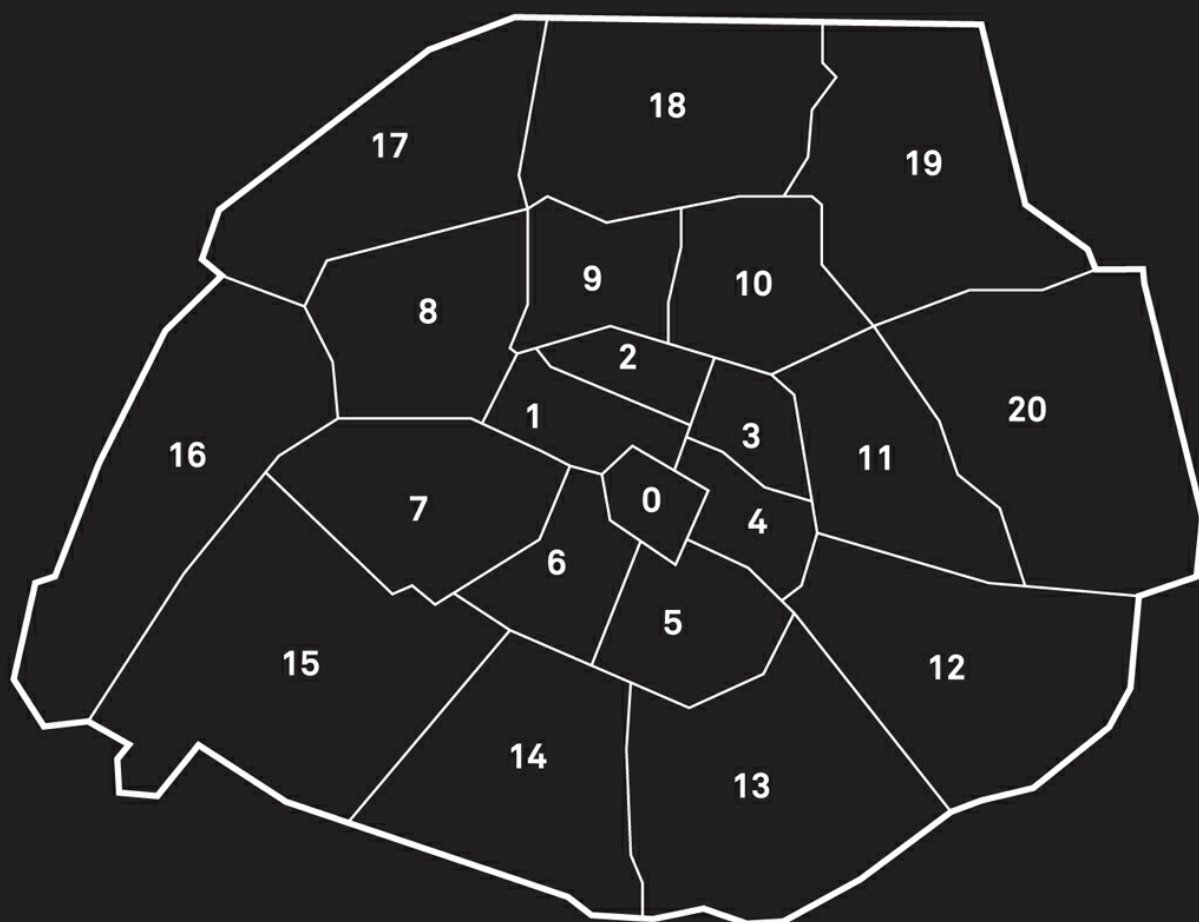
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The Academy

The Academy (official name: Shiki Island) is a man-made island built at a point several hundred miles south-southeast of Tokyo Bay.

It is home to a single large city divided into twenty districts, with a total population of approximately one million (around half of which are students).

Touting itself as an institution for “educating true elites,” it has countless numbers of great achievers among its alumni, thanks in no small part to the “Games” it encourages students to wage against one another.

Prologue

Misgivings and Targets

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“Hmm? Oh, *you*, huh? You’re late.”

It was the dead of night. Yet despite the late hour, the man turned around calmly in the dimly lit room.

“...Yes. I’m sorry.”

The low voice made the young girl jump slightly. She could only answer meekly. After entering the room with the greatest reluctance, she stared at her feet, face frozen. The tall man stood, paying her body language no mind, and approached with his left hand stuck in a pocket of his suit. When he was right in front of her, he presented her with the pile of papers in his right hand.

“This is all the data we’ve been able to find so far on your target. You need to memorize all of the contents here and run it through this shredder afterward. That, or eat the documents, like in that *Book Girl* series.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary, sir.”

“No? Great. I hope you’re just as capable on the job.”

The girl didn’t respond, either not hearing the man or choosing to ignore him. She received the documents and flipped through them. The target’s name was Hiroto Shinohara, a first-class rookie prospect whose name everyone on the Academy knew. However...

“Heh... Do you think this is even possible? Sure, he’s a Seven Star. There’s no way to mess with the star-hunting system, so that much is the truth. But that doesn’t mean we have to believe everything *else* about him.”

“Yes... There’s likely something lurking under the surface.”

“Not ‘likely.’ There *is*. It doesn’t add up otherwise.”

The man spun back on his heels, the tapping of his shoes beating out a steady rhythm as he walked back toward the window. Like an actor in an old detective film, he used two fingers to push a couple of the window blind's slats down, revealing the night cityscape beyond. He grinned.

"I dunno if he's some miracle Seven Star or the world's most powerful transfer student or whatever...but unfortunately for him, 'miracles' aren't allowed on this island. We don't allow them. It's time to show him what happens when stupid little Icarus gets too close to the sun."

The bold declaration floated off into the darkened sky. The girl kept her gaze lowered, but she nodded.

Chapter 1

The Fourth Ward Challenge Begins

#

“Quiet! Everyone, please remain quiet!”

It was the morning of Wednesday, April 20, and the Class A second-year students at Eimei School were settling into the semester’s routine. A cute voice rang out across the classroom, trying to sound as authoritative as possible.

“All right... All right! I’ve got some wonderful news for you all today! There’s a lot of other announcements, too, so make sure you listen to everything, okay?”

Ms. Nanachan, the class’s homeroom teacher, stood before her students, hands clasped tightly in front of her. Nanachan wasn’t her real name, of course, but everyone addressed her by that nickname, and I wasn’t about to rock the boat. Her fluffy hair and pastel-colored outfit made her look more like a college student than like a wizened schoolteacher.

Gathering her breath, Ms. Nanachan raised her index finger diagonally and spoke with a bright voice.

“First off! This class is getting another transfer student!”

“““?!””””

Hushed words were exchanged. Joy and shock dominated the room...and I guessed I could see why. The words *transfer student* were enough to strike wonder into the hearts of all without exception. However, Class 2-A had already received one—me, Hiroto Shinohara—a week ago. Having two new kids in as many weeks was unheard of.

“...”

I didn’t look particularly alarmed, sitting at my desk in the back row. I mean, I hardly ever showed my real emotions, but there wasn’t much alarming about

this development regardless. I knew who was waiting out in the hallway.

“Hee-hee-hee! Exciting, right? Looking forward to the big reveal? Well, all right! No point delaying this any further—let’s introduce her right now!”

With that introduction, delivered with sheer, boundless, bright intensity, Ms. Nanachan raised her left hand toward the hallway and said, “Come on in!”

“All right,” answered a cool voice.

The door opened without a sound. There was a graceful tapping. Her slender, refined form captured everyone’s attention. After shaking down her silvery hair, the girl meekly bowed her head.

“Hello. My name is Shirayuki Himeji. I attended Ohga School in the Third Ward, but after some personal affairs, I’ve moved here to Eimei School. I must admit that I’m not very good at meeting people for the first time, especially boys, so I may inadvertently act rude around some of you at first...but I don’t hate anyone. If you could be patient with me, I’d appreciate that very much.”

Himeji looked everyone in the class square in the eye as she spoke, not hesitating once. Yup, she was the new transfer. This girl, who was the same age as me, now served as my supporter thanks to a series of unlikely events. I usually saw her in a classically dichromatic maid outfit, but Eimei School’s uniform complimented her figure, too.

Sorry, my mind was wandering.

There were several reasons for Himeji’s transfer to Eimei. First, the public already knew she was my friend. At the large-scale Game we’d held a week and a half ago—the one where I beat Five Star Seiran Kugasaki after nearly losing—she was the one holding me up at the end in front of that huge audience. On this island, it was generally considered unthinkable for a student from one ward to cooperate with one from another. We’d needed to quickly build a valid backstory explaining why she’d lend me a hand.

On the Academy, your stars determined everything around you. Transferring schools involved a transfer of stars. You couldn’t move simply because you wanted a change of scenery. There were several steps involved, and none of them were easy. And that our provost had schemed—sorry, I mean wielded her

extensive connections—to make it work was undoubtedly thanks to certain other troubles we were facing.

Things would definitely be harder without Himeji at Eimei. Losing her remote support during Games is a drawback, but I guess Kagaya will be taking her place.

I watched Himeji, as did all my classmates, while I quietly mulled things over. People might have thought me overly cautious, but there was no harm in staying on my guard. Every day presented opportunities for my lie to be exposed, both in Games and out.

Calling it a lie didn't do it justice, honestly. I, Hiroto Shinohara, had deceived the entire Academy. This island operated according to an all-powerful meritocracy, and I, a Two Star after winning the battle with Kugasaki, had to do everything in my power to act like a Seven Star, the peak of this caste system. Thanks to some rather complicated events, even Grand Headmaster Masamune Saionji, leader of the Academy, was in on the con. If my cover was blown, it would be a megaton event that promised to mark the end of my whole life.

That was why the Company, a team of cheating specialists that included Himeji and Kagaya, was an indispensable tool for keeping this lie going.

That part will be hard to forget with Himeji around now, I thought with a smile. While I propped my head against my hand on the desk, the muttering in the classroom turned to full-on discussion. Some guys were so excited that they were standing. That wasn't too surprising. Despite having been on-screen for only a moment during my last Game, Himeji the silver-haired maid was now generating buzz. She had gathered a huge fan base practically overnight. Her connection to me was already a widely reported fact. Students' eyes darted between us as they undoubtedly wondered about our relationship.

“ ... ”

Himeji breezily took in the many gazes as she bowed. She'd been assigned the best seat in the house, the desk by the window in the back row. After Ms. Nanachan motioned to the desk, Himeji gracefully walked over, stood in front of me, politely bowed once more, and gave a slight smile.

““““Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh!!””””

It felt like more than a few classmates lost their hearts to this first expression from her. I ignored them, knowing there was no point in acknowledging it.

“Oh, right, Eimei School’s Fourth Ward Challenge starts tomorrow! I’ve already told you how it’ll work in previous homerooms, but let’s go over the basics one more time!”

Ms. Nanachan spoke for a while, but no one paid her any attention because of the new transfer student.

“It’s good to meet you, Shirayuki! I’m Fuuka Tatara, the class president!”

Not long after homeroom, a girl bursting with energy and a ponytail that seemed to have a mind of its own was the first to speak with Himeji. She’d described herself as the future president when we first met. I guess she’d won the election in the time since.

“Ah... Um, yeah.”

Himeji froze for a moment, surprised at this sudden friendly gesture, but loosened up with a sigh and returned the greeting with a deep bow.

“Ms. Tatara, it’s good to meet you. And thank you very much for coming to say hello. I don’t know very much about things in the Fourth Ward yet, so I’d appreciate any advice.”

“Oh? Uh... Wow, Shirayuki, you’re so uptight! I feel like we’re a hundred and twenty million light years away from each other!”



“...You do? I didn’t mean to imply that at all...”

“Oh, no? Um, well, it’s totally fine...but it’d be nice if you didn’t call me ‘Ms.’ and stuff! You don’t usually use that with your friends, so it kind of throws me off!”

“Friends...?”

Himeji turned toward me after whispering the word. Concern showed in her expression. As a servant of the Saionji family since early childhood, she’d practically never left the house until middle school. Even at Ohga School, she’d completed all of her coursework online. This was possibly the first time she’d been asked to have anything resembling a casual conversation. I couldn’t blame her for being a bit lost because of Tatara’s hands-on approach.

“...”

I nodded at Himeji, attempting to convey that Tatara didn’t mean any harm. Himeji relaxed her frown, then ran a hand along her silver hair.

“...I see. Since we’re friends, you’d like us to establish a more casual rapport with each other?”

“Right, right, right! You got it, Shirayuki! Perfect!”

“Very well, then. In that case...I will be glad to call you Fuuka from now on.”

“Wow! Great! Thanks so much!”

Tatara clapped her hands, smiling broadly.

At this rate, it wouldn’t take long for Himeji to blend in with the class. Unfortunately, that’s when Tatara got more hands on. Leaning in close, she turned her intensity up a notch.

“Hey! I wanna know, um, what kinda relationship do you and Shinohara have? It’d be really cool if you could tell me, ha-ha-ha!”

It was the question on everyone’s mind. I didn’t need to scan the room to feel all the eyes on us.

“What kinda relationship,” huh? I thought. *It’s way too complex to sum up in a single response.* I suppose something like “She’s my assistant” would have been

the most truthful answer. However, we were under no obligation to be honest. We had seen this question coming a mile in advance and had prepared a nice, harmless response.

“I can tell you, sure.” Himeji shot me a glance. “I’m a part of Eimei School now, but before today I’ve served my master, Hiroto Shinohara, as his maid. When describing the nature of our relationship, I think it is most suitably described as a master-servant arrangement.”

“Wow, so it *is* like that!”

Tatara’s eyes gleamed at Himeji’s explanation.

“...”

Having arrived from mainland Japan only a few weeks ago, I still found the idea of having someone as my maid pretty bizarre. But on the Academy, it wasn’t too rare for people to keep maids or other servants. This island ran on a unique social system whereby accumulating stars directly affected the level of housing you were afforded. Once you were at least a Five Star, you were permitted a personal servant, and possibly more. The Empress, that red-haired girl I knew a little too well by now, had a good fifty or so attendants to order around, if you counted everyone who worked at her family’s estate. Knowing all this, we’d concluded that it was best not to conceal Himeji’s job.

“Ohhh! Wowww... Wow! That’s great! I’m almost jealous...!” Tatara didn’t seem to find Himeji’s answer that odd.

“Hmm. If you’re Shinohara’s maid, that means you go to his place, right?”

“...? Well, yes.”

She lived with me, actually, but Himeji was wise enough to omit that.

Tatara’s face reddened, and she lowered her voice as she asked, “So, uh...is Shinohara getting, you know, weird with you or anything?”

“Weird...?”

“Don’t make me say it! Um, you know, all...*huffy* and stuff!”

Tatara shut her eyes tight as she spoke. The other girls nodded, as though backing her up. I think her embarrassment over asking made her pick a more

awkward adjective than she'd probably intended. I knew what Tatara was getting at. Again, it was a perfectly fair thing to inquire about.

I shook my head, betraying no emotion. "Nah... It's only been a few weeks since we first met. There are no weird feelings or anything."

"Ohhh. Yeah... Oh! Asking that makes it sound like I have a bunch of perverted fantasies running through my mind, doesn't it?! B-but I don't! I don't! It's just, as class president, I have to make sure no one is doing anything inappropriate in their personal lives! Y-you pass with flying colors, Shinohara! I'm giving you the class president's seal of approval!"

Tatara's face flushed more and more as she attempted to conjure up an excuse. It sounded like she'd accepted that my relationship with Himeji was strictly platonic. Other students surely had their own suspicions, but this backstory would likely work for a while.

While I mulled this over, the girls who'd gathered around Himeji changed the topic to introductions, no doubt because they felt a little bad for Tatara.

"There were thirty-six people in this class, and now you make thirty-seven! We're the highest-ranked second-year class in the school, so we've got nothing but ace students!"

"I see... And you're one as well, Fuuka?"

"Me? Well...I do all right. But I'm not exactly hitting home runs. In addition to being class president, I also run track and hold a seat on the student council, so...maybe I get an E for effort?"

"What? You get really good grades, Tatara."

Another student entered the conversation late to deny Tatara's attempt at modesty. It was Yuuki Tsuji, a guy whose looks skewed close to the middle of the gender spectrum. He was also the classmate I chatted with the most often. He could be pretty abrasive at times, although I suppose you could say that was because he didn't sugarcoat things. Given the way he regarded Himeji, he knew how to respect people, at least.

"She's a Three Star, too," he added, casting a smile in Tatara's direction. "And she's popular. *And* taller than me."

“Who cares about that last one?! Anyway, I don’t think I’m doing terribly. But, you know, we’ve got an anomaly like Shinohara here. And...I assume you’re at least a Three Star, right, Shirayuki? I wasn’t allowed access to anything in your profile, after all. Shinohara, do you know?”

“Ahh, right, Himeji’s a Four Star.”

““Ohhhhh...!””

Tsuji and Tatara cheered at the news. Himeji just gave a light bow in response. The difference between three and four didn’t seem like much, but on the Academy, a single star could be a huge gap to traverse. Going from three to four earned you access to a whole new level of Abilities, for one.

That bit of info only revved up Tatara even further. Now she was back in Himeji’s face again.

“That’s so awesome! You’re a Four Star, Himeji! That means we have six whole people in 2-A ranked Four Star or higher! Ugh, I gotta start working harder!”

“People could learn from that can-do attitude of yours, President. Wait, do we have that many high-ranking students? Shinohara’s a Seven Star, of course, and I know Sawaki’s a Four Star, and so are Kitamura and Wagahara... That’s it, isn’t it? Himeji would be the fifth.”

“Huh? No way. There’s the four you said, and then...then...wait, huh?! Ah, I completely forgot!”

Tatara thought for a bit, index finger tapping her chin, but soon grabbed her head with both hands in a show of defeat. “I’m supposed to be class president!” she wailed from the bottom of her heart. Did she really need to go so far? It’s not like the class president was tasked with memorizing the profiles of her classmates, especially so soon into the school year.

“...You’re such a kind person, Fuuka,” Himeji said softly. It was a nice, heartwarming moment between them. Sort of. After another clap of her hands, Tatara bowed her head to me.

“I can’t remember! I give up! Sorry, Shinohara, can you tell us?”

“...Huh?”

Her request came too suddenly for me to respond appropriately. Given the conversation, Tatara clearly wanted to know who the fourth Four Star in our class was. Asking someone who’d just transferred might have seemed strange, but it wasn’t at all. I was a Seven Star. I should have had access to information on everyone. Nothing that would be an invasion of someone’s privacy, of course; just basic stats like name, school, and star ranking. Anyone with a lower rank than me was fair game.

But that was all only true for a real Seven Star, not a fake who’d cheated the system.

Crap... Trouble first thing in the day.

I began to panic, although I kept it from showing on my face. Himeji and I had anticipated issues like this, of course. These sorts of everyday, non-Game-related dangers that threatened my facade had become quite frequent. That’s why I constantly had an earpiece linked to the Company for emergency support. In other words, I was fully prepared.

At least, I should have been.

Why is someone snoring in my earpiece?!

Yes, all that came through the device was the sound of someone enjoying a refreshing nap. The occasional mumbling made it clear that Kagaya was on the other end of the line, but she was in no shape to offer the vital info I needed.

Himeji only handed over the job to Kagaya this morning, so maybe she figured nothing would happen on the first day... Ugh!

I sighed mentally, certain that’s what had happened. Then, with a polite cough, I calmly threw the question right back at Tatara.

“Umm... Tell you what, Tatara? I’m sorry, I didn’t quite hear you.”

“Oh, uh, so, we were talking about the fourth Four Star in our class! I know we’ve got Sawaki, Wagahara, and Kitamura, but I can’t recall the last one!”

“Not that it’s super important right now...but it’d feel weird to say ‘I dunno’ and give up,” Tsuji added.

“It’s not about feeling weird! Forgetting something about my classmates besmirches my class president dignity! C’mon, Shinohara, just whisper it into my ear for me!”

Tatara now had my hands in hers, practically pleading for the answer. I’d hoped to steer the conversation away from this, but that didn’t appear possible.

How am I going to get out of this? I desperately searched for an answer while remaining calm externally. Suddenly, I felt something tug at the edge of my blazer sleeve.

Hmm?

It was clearly a signal, and it repeated several times. It was Himeji. She’d edged a bit closer from her seat beside me to get my attention while Tsuji’s and Tatara’s attentions were elsewhere.

Wait...this is one of the signs we came up with for emergencies, right? Three tugs on my uniform in a row means “Listen to me,” right?

Himeji and I had talked about this late into the night yesterday. If Himeji wanted my attention, it meant she likely knew the answer. She must have accessed the school’s student records somehow. Anyway, *why* she knew didn’t matter. I needed to figure out how she was going to relay the answer to me.

The quickest way would be to lean over and let her whisper it into my ear. Unfortunately, something that blatant wouldn’t work. We could move to another location, but that had its dangers, too. Leaving the classroom together at this moment made no sense at all. Departing and returning together would rouse a lot of suspicion.

I’m just gonna have to ask Himeji here...without anyone noticing.

I took a breath. Part of me wanted to ask why I had to go through all these challenges, even during the normal moments of my life. The immediate answer was that Kagaya, my lifeline, was napping. However, I understood that if I wanted to keep my lie going until the end, I’d need to endure these little crises.

Okay.

“...? Mm, mgh... K-koff! ...Excuse me.”

Suddenly Himeji half groaned and half coughed a bit, then stretched. She covered her mouth with one hand before returning to normal. That, of course, was meant to mask my reaching behind her and giving a different signal through her uniform. Her response lasted only a single instant, and thankfully, Tsuji and Tatara didn't catch on. The command was quite simple: "Bend down for me."

"Ah... Master, your shoe's about to go untied."

Himeji kept her mouth shut for a moment, perhaps because she was fighting the tickle I'd given her. Once I took my hand away, she bent down and reached for my shoes, which were actually sneakers. (They were part of a licensing deal Eimei School had with some business in the Fourth Ward or something.)

"Mm? Oh, that's cool. I'll do it myself."

Upon seeing Himeji take action, I followed her lead, quietly bending over. Once our heads were below our desks, they got pretty close. Himeji's prim face and clear blue eyes occupied most of my vision.

"...!"

My pulse quickened, but I leaned to the right to offer my ear. I don't think it looked too unnatural, but it would be tough to stay in this position for very long.

I pretended to tie my shoes for a moment, then I lifted my head. In the middle of the act, I heard a breathy whisper.

"Excuse me, Master. The answer to the question is apparently Ms. Mirei Nakano."

"..."

Now it was my turn to mask a tickle from her hushed words. Fortunately, I managed to straighten back up without any change in my expression.

"Sorry," I said to a confused Tatara as I took my device out. "You were asking me about the fourth Four Star in class, right...? Oh. I don't think I've spoken to her yet, but my device says it's a girl named Nakano?"

"Ahhhh! Yes! Mirei! Right, right, I heard she went up a rank at the start of the

semester! I feel so relieved now... Thanks, Shinohara. You really saved me!”

Tatara continued to offer exaggerated appreciation while Tsuji nodded beside her and muttered things like “Wow, her, huh?” Himeji and I shared a relieved sigh.

You know, if I was going to bust out my device anyway, couldn't she have just texted me the answer...?

I think we both realized that at the same time. Still, we'd made it through unscathed. That was good enough.

#

“...Here. You can have this, Himeji.”

Himeji and I were enjoying lunch on a bench in the courtyard with no one else around. Normally I'd be enjoying a box lunch Himeji had prepared, but she'd been occupied by the transfer procedures this morning, so today's meal was formed from a couple of items we'd managed to seize from the cafeteria. I say “seize” instead of “buy” for a reason. I'd heard rumors about this before and was surprised to learn it was true. At Eimei, you had to beat the lunch staffers at pseudo-Games before you were allowed to purchase food from them. That was the unwritten rule. If you wanted to score even a half-decent lunch, you needed to be prepared for an intense battle every day.

Things like that were common at Eimei School, symbols of an overall aggressive approach to education. The cafeteria's famed chocolate-filled croissants were a particularly egregious example of this. The competition for them was almost a life-or-death fight. As a Seven Star, I felt a lot of pressure to go for one, so I'd enlisted the help of Himeji and the recently awakened Kagaya to cheat my way to victory.

“Hmm? Um, I'm not sure I should...”

I tried handing the bag with the cafeteria logo that held the fluffy croissant to Himeji. She blinked her blue eyes in evident surprise.

“Are you sure about this, Master? You're the one who earned it.”

“Sure. I only wanted a sandwich. Besides, you're the one who did all the work. If you don't want it, I'll take it, but...”

Himeji froze for a moment. While keeping her hands on her lap, she slowly averted her gaze.

“...I didn’t say that.”

She bashfully accepted the chocolate croissant, stared at it for a moment, then parted her small lips and bit into it.

“Mm. Mmm...mgh...*hrmf...hrmf...*”

“Um, are you okay, Himeji? You don’t have to eat so quickly.”

“Ah! I-I’m sorry. It’s just so good that I wasn’t able to stop myself.”

The moment she’d taken the first bite, her eyes had widened a little. Then she’d chewed with joyful gusto until I spoke up. Her cheeks turned a bit red from embarrassment. Seeing someone as coolheaded as Himeji completely lose herself like that told me the croissant had to be really good. No wonder it was the most popular item on the menu.

“Guess I’ll get started, too...”

That cute little display had whetted my appetite enough that I removed my sandwich from its paper bag. We enjoyed our food in the empty courtyard, free from any worries for a while. After a bit, Himeji finished her little milk carton, thanked me for the meal, and used a napkin to wipe her hands neatly.

“It’s fast approaching, isn’t it, Master?”

“What is? Oh, right. That event.”

I quickly realized what she was talking about. Himeji nodded at me.

She was referring to the Fourth Ward Challenge Ms. Nanachan had mentioned during homeroom. Himeji’s arrival had overshadowed it, but for the two of us, the challenge was the biggest threat at the moment.

“The Fourth Ward Challenge, or 4WC.” Himeji turned herself toward me a little. “It’s a regular event at Eimei School, held at the end of April every year. The function operates as a kind of student orientation. To be more precise, it’s a qualifying event that determines who will represent the school in the larger-scale Interward League matches in the future.”

Just as Himeji said, the Fourth Ward Challenge was akin to the Olympic qualifiers. It was an internal competition held to decide the team that would play against students from other wards. A lot of schools picked their squads strictly based on star count. However, Eimei used this event instead, partly to give new students a tutorial on how the whole Game system operated.

“The 4WC...”

I tapped my right ear a couple of times, ensuring that Kagaya would keep an eye on my surroundings while I spoke openly.

“So basically, it’s a big survival match, yeah? Every student at Eimei will be a player, and it’s single elimination. The player count drops until there’s a winner. Seems similar to *PUBG* or *Apex*.”

“Indeed, that comparison isn’t far off the mark.” Himeji nodded, then raised her right index finger. “Starting tomorrow, a special command called Trial will be available on Eimei School grounds from eight in the morning to five in the evening. That includes on Saturday and Sunday. The command allows you to play Games against participants, which, I’ll remind you, includes every member of the Eimei student body. Losing means elimination. These are just simulated Games, though, so no stars will change hands.”

“Right. So it’s functionally the same as playing Games against people, but there are a few differences. I remember that you can challenge anyone to a Trial, regardless of your rank... Not that *I’m* gonna be challenging anyone during this event, I’m sure.”

I grinned. That was probably the biggest difference between a Game and a Trial. You could only challenge someone higher ranked than yourself to a Game, but there were no such restrictions with Trials. The goal here wasn’t to beat a lot of opponents but to survive as long as possible. There wasn’t much merit to someone like me picking off beginners or low-ranking players.

However, there were also a few more differences to consider. The 4WC had a mode called “In Combat,” which meant that either you had challenged someone to a Trial or you’d received a challenge from another player. When “In Combat,” you weren’t allowed to challenge or be challenged. In other words, if you wanted to take on a certain opponent, it was first come, first served. The

moment you got a request from someone, the Trial began right there, whether you wanted it to or not.

You'd think players could abuse that feature by starting a Trial and then never finishing to keep both players safe. It wasn't that simple, though. If players were inactive in a Trial for twenty-four hours, they would both be knocked out of the event. Provost Ichinose would oversee the rules, and I guess this was the way she wanted things to work.

"...Yes, that's the basic idea."

Himeji nodded at me as we reviewed things one last time. She sidled a bit closer and fixed me with her clear blue eyes.

"When it comes to the 4WC...you *know* that you can't afford to lose, Master."

"Yeah..." I agreed meekly. These were just Trials with no stars on the line, but if I, the supposed strongest student on the Academy, couldn't even win an event like this, I'd be screwed. I'd get laughed at, looked down upon, and doubted. At worst, I might have all my lies exposed.

But on the other hand, if I won the 4WC, I'd be sitting pretty in my current position within Eimei. I'd prove my claim as the greatest at school. It was the perfect evidence to support my lie. I could ask for no better foundation.

"Job one is beating the Fourth Ward Challenge and giving people the impression that I'm the undisputed king of Eimei School. That'll solidify my standing here, which is exactly what I need."

"Yes, Master. And that's why I'm here as well."

Himeji placed a hand on her chest and flashed a faint smile at me. Yes. The 4WC was one reason the provost had called in so many favors to get Himeji transferred to Eimei.

Excluding a few well-known contenders who seriously wanted to survive the 4WC to the end, the great majority of students couldn't even dream of winning. It was almost impossible...and it was those students who were bound to throw challenges my way. Partly out of pure curiosity, of course, and since they didn't expect to survive long, they'd lose nothing by taking me on. Plus, if they managed to win, they'd become famous instantly. I was bound to spend the

4WC weathering constant attacks. And since my task was to *never* lose, Himeji had decided it was best for her to stay close to me at all times, instead of assisting from a remote location.

“With how the 4WC works,” she explained, eyes still on me, “even Five or Six Stars run the chance of losing. This will be a constant string of battles, and twenty-four hours after the Trial request doesn’t give you much time to prepare. To be frank, Master, most of the rules hurt your chances. Still, we have to dominate. We have to win and set in stone your reputation as the strongest.”

“Yeah... Guess it’s the only way, huh?”

I nodded at Himeji’s quiet but impassioned speech. It was a fact that the Fourth Ward Challenge would be fraught with disadvantages, but I wasn’t going in blind. I’d spent the past few days engaged in more prep work and meetings than I wanted to think about, all so I could survive the next week.

“Of course, most of the prep we’ve done is debating over how to reduce the number of Trials I’m subjected to. My strategy involves a lot of running, basically—using the Company’s guidance and my support Abilities to dodge everyone. That’s the gist of it, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. If a challenge comes your way, we’ll handle it the same way we do a Game. However, the 4WC rules stipulate that challenges must be sent on Eimei School grounds between eight and five. Games are usually organized online, but to send a Trial challenge, you need to physically point your device at the person you wish to take on. That requires a certain distance from the target. I think it’s plausible to dodge all competitors throughout the entire event.”

“Yeah. And I know the Company’s working on some stuff to help me with that. Actually, the provost called me in for a meeting after lunch, so maybe we can check on our escape routes and stuff again—”

“...*Hiro, Hiro! Stop! Stop talking! Someone’s coming!*” a voice called in my ear. It was Kagaya. Guess she was on the job right now, as opposed to this morning.

Gulp!

Himeji and I traded glances. “By the way,” I said, instantly switching to a

humdrum topic, “you know how in our class just now...” A few seconds later, a girl walked by the bench, just as Kagaya had warned.

“Ah! There you are. Hiroto, right?”

“Huh?”

She stopped in front of us, leaning down a bit as she spoke to me. From the first sentence, I sensed that she wasn’t just a random passerby. I looked up at her.

“Eh-heh!”

“...”

I was stunned speechless instantly. The girl striking up this conversation was, to put it lightly, mind-blowingly beautiful. Like a pop idol. That was the best way to put it. Every feature of her face was perfect. There was still a bit of immature innocence to it, and the chestnut hair tied in twin ponytails that went as low as her shoulders gave her a touch of tender kindness. She was on the smaller side—the sort of size that made you instinctively want to protect her as you would a small animal. She just...*felt* like a girl. That’s how I’d put it.

Naturally, I completely failed to give a coherent response. She pouted.

“Hmph... You’re just ignoring me, Hiroto? Here’s me, cute little Noa, bravely approaching you...and this is how you act? That’s really mean, don’t you think?”

“Er, I didn’t mean to ignore you.”

“Oh, no? So you were smitten at first sight, huh? Wow! ♡ Well, I can’t blame you for that!”

The girl softened her expression while complimenting herself. Evidently, her name was Noa, but I still had little idea of what I was dealing with.

“Umm...so can I ask who you are?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Me?” the girl asked, holding her hands behind her back as she smiled, her sizable ponytails wavering in the air. “My name’s Noa Akizuki! Good to meet you! ♪ I’m a little shorter than everyone else, but I’m actually in my third year, so I’m your senior. I’m a winter baby, too!”

“A third year? Wow. I’m sorry. I should have been more respectful to an upperclassman.”

“Mm? Oh, don’t worry about that! On this island, your stars matter a whole lot more than your grade!”

Akizuki waved her hand in the air to dismiss my apology. When I replied, “All right,” she took a step closer. This gave me a front-row seat to her neck and collarbones, which stood out from her school attire. I thought I glimpsed one of her bra straps, too, so I promptly pointed my eyes elsewhere.

“But enough about thaaat,” Akizuki continued, grinning. I couldn’t tell if she’d noticed or not. “Hee-hee! You’re a real powerful dude, huh, Hiroto? ♪ I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone solo a cafeteria Game like that before! ♡”

“Oh? Oh...so that’s why you came looking for me.”

Now it made sense. Maybe this encounter wasn’t so strange after all. Looking closer, I realized that Akizuki was carrying a bag behind her. It was the same kind my chocolate croissant had come in.

“Wait, you got one, too, didn’t you?”

“Oh, you saw? Hee-hee! I thought I hid it well...and of course I did. After all, I’m really talented, really smart, and *really* cute! ♪”

Apparently, she wasn’t much for modesty. She retrieved the pastry and took a lick of the filling, letting out an “Oooh... ♡” as though in a state of agonized happiness. It was a pretty obvious act, but Akizuki genuinely looked cute, which made it all the more annoying.

“...Ahem.”

I decided to recenter this conversation, lest she run away with it and ruin my pace.

“So? Did you want something, Akizuki?”

“Want something? Hmm... Well, I guess I do, yeah...”

Akizuki looked at Himeji with a thoughtful finger on her chin. She lightly nodded, then gave us a playful grin.

“Hee-hee! I’m sorry, did I interrupt? That’s why you’re angry, isn’t it, Hiroto?”

“I didn’t say anything like that. I’m not trying to brush you off. I’m just curious why you’re interested in me. I’m not thrilled, but I’m not bothered, either.”

“Oh, really? Hee-hee! I just wanted to talk because I’m genuinely curious about you, Hiroto! ♪ For example...I was wondering, are the two of you an item or something?”

“The two of us? Himeji and I? You’ve got the wrong idea.”

“That’s right. Our relations are completely on the level. For now, anyway.”

“Aww, really? But we’re talking about a maid and her master. You’re together every day. It’d be weird if something *didn’t* happen! ♡”

“I don’t think so. People are free to imagine what they like, though.”

“Oh yeah? Hmm. Okay. Well, in that case... *Hup!*”

...?!

While smiling at my response, Akizuki turned around and sat herself on the bench right beside me. She didn’t bother keeping her distance. In fact, she was practically leaning on me.

“Hee-hee-hee! ♡” She giggled. Peering up at me, she said, “It’s a lot easier to talk like this, don’t you think?”

“...I’m not sure where you got that idea. You’re smothering me. Get off.”

“Aww, what’s the big deal? This is a nice bonus for you, isn’t it? Getting so close to a girl like me. You should stop holding back and take your fill... ♡”

I regarded her with a bland stare, but Akizuki didn’t give up. In fact, she put both hands around my arm, ending any attempt at shaking her off. We looked like a couple flirting with each other in some public park. Her large, soft breasts pushed hard against my body, her shiny hair and captivating breath tickling my neck as the sweet, citrusy aroma wafting from her entire body wrapped around me. It made my head go fuzzy...



Ow!

And if not for Himeji pinching my other side, I might have lost myself. That was a close one.

I coughed one more time before restarting the conversation.

“Erm... Akizuki, can we skip this and just get to whatever you want to talk about?”

“Aw, boo! You’re so impatient, Hiroto... All right.”

Akizuki looked peeved, but she inched away from me a little and nodded. “I wanted to ask,” she said, voice less cloying now, “about the Fourth Ward Challenge. I’m sure you know about it, right?”

“Sure. I’m not that interested in it, but with all the hype, it’s hard not to be aware.”

“Right, I’m sure. You’ve heard of LNN, yeah? It’s the biggest news app on the Academy. Libra runs it. There was a survey about the 4WC a couple days ago, polling the expected top ten, possible strategies, who to stage Trials with, and other stuff. Did you see?”

“No, I didn’t. That sounds like something LNN would do, though.” Figuring this wouldn’t blow my cover, I answered honestly. I’d met with Kazami from Libra several times already, and I knew how much she loved big spectacles that allowed her to stand in the spotlight. The 4WC was undoubtedly high on her list of must-cover events. However, given that this was strictly an internal Eimei School thing, I doubted that Libra itself would get too involved.

“Hmm? You don’t seem too interested, huh, Hiroto? I get that, yeah.”

Akizuki’s reaction to my disinterested response felt strange. All the softness in her demeanor vanished. Suddenly, her voice sounded flat and disengaged.

What’s with that...?

I frowned a bit...but Akizuki’s expression quickly regained its bubblyness. No matter how much I scrutinized it, nothing seemed out of place. I had to wonder if I’d imagined her looking disinterested.

“Hee-hee! So,” she said, each word bouncing like a spring, “I just got a notification from LNN, and the results are in from the viewer predictions. As cute and talented as I am, I’m up pretty high on the list. But you’re number one, Hiroto. Hee-hee! Isn’t that great? ♪”

I shrugged. “Oh, really? I guess it’s natural that people would expect a lot from me.”

Akizuki chatted about the Libra article and the upcoming event for a while, but upon realizing that lunchtime was nearly over, she clapped her hands to bring an end to the conversation.

“Hee-hee! Okay, bye for now, Hiroto. Thanks for spending so much time talking with me! ♡”

She stood from the bench, waved, and spun around. However, she only got a few steps before turning back. “Let’s both do our best, okay? ♪” she said, smiling and using her most sickly-sweet tone.

““...””

Himeji and I watched her walk off without a word. A few seconds later, Himeji heaved a sigh.

“We need to watch for her.”

“...We do?”

“Yes. That was Ms. Noa Akizuki. She’s a third year in Class A, a Six Star that people call the ‘Little Devil.’ There are three Six Stars at Eimei School, and she’s the most prominent in terms of Game performance. She could become a major threat during this event.”

“A Six Star...?! Really? She’s that high up?”

“She is. That, and... How to put it? Something about her set off alarm bells with me. Like she’s more than just a powerful foe. It’s as if there’s something lurking under the surface that we can’t see. Hopefully I’m just imagining it, though.”

Then Himeji brought her right hand to her lips, falling silent.

“...”

I thought quietly for a moment, ruminating over her opinion. I couldn't put it into words, but I sensed something odd about the exchange with Akizuki. Looking back, all we'd done was chat. I had no idea what she was trying to do.

Whatever her goal, it would have to wait. The notification bell for fifth period went off, and I needed to get back to class.

"By the way, Master...is that girl your type?"

"Huh?"

As I stood from the bench, the expressionless Himeji shot me a point-blank question that left me at a loss. I spent the next five minutes or so defending myself.

#

"Heh-heh... Well, hello there. Doing well?"

After the end of sixth period, when all my classroom duties were over for the day, I left Himeji with Tatara (who insisted on giving her a grand tour of the school) and headed into the center of the school alone. I still had Kagaya thanks to my earpiece, though.

The provost's office at Eimei School was an ode to both luxury and good taste, and Natsume Ichinose was seated on a sofa in the middle of the room, wearing a tight skirt and crossing her legs. A smile decorated her face.

"I had some free time because you were so late, so I thought I'd have a little fun. What did you think?"

"Oh, that was you?"

I sighed. Halfway through fifth period, I'd received over twenty anonymous messages on my device, from emails and texts to DMs on the STOC social network and even calls. They'd all had different subjects, but each ended with something like "Come see me at the provost's office, okay? ☆," which gave them a horror-movie touch.

"It was definitely effective. You sure have a lot of speaking styles, though. You'd be great at impressions."

"Heh-heh! Oh yeah? I'm glad you found it entertaining. You can pay me back

later.”

“I’ll be sure not to.”

If anything, I thought she owed me a dinner to apologize for the spam. Regardless, I shook my head and looked straight at the provost. We had business to attend to.

“Is this about the Fourth Ward Challenge?”

“Yeah,” the provost replied casually. “Not about the event itself, but something heavily connected to it. As you know, the 4WC’s an Eimei event that decides who’ll represent our school in competitions against other wards. Obviously, you need to win. That’s why we called Shirayuki over from the Third Ward. And that wasn’t exactly easy. Do you have any idea how much of a pain it is to transfer a student between wards? I tried to keep the fallout to a minimum, but I definitely owe the Ohga provost a favor now.”

She sighed, looking crestfallen. I’m sure she wasn’t embellishing. Academy schools were rivals, and a student moving from one ward to another was extremely rare. That went double for an accomplished Four Star like Shirayuki Himeji. I’m sure Ohga School had asked for quite a bit in return.

“I’m grateful you did. I can’t afford to lose, after all.”

“Heh-heh...! So long as you understand what I did to help, then it’s fine.”

“Are you trying to imply I should do something?”

“Ah, well spotted, Shinohara! I appreciate your perception.” Ichinose shifted her legs, then grinned at me as she pushed her glasses up with one hand. “To tell the truth,” she began quietly, “there are two unusual phenomena unfolding at Eimei.”

“Unusual phenomena?”

“Right. First...I still don’t have a lot of details about this, but it sounds like some kind of external element is trying to interfere with this event. Alarms have been going off constantly since yesterday. I’m looking into it, but we’re dealing with a pretty crafty foe here. We still haven’t found a scent to track yet.”

The provost delivered this news calmly, but there was clear irritation on her

face. Presumably she'd spent the past day handling this. Maybe that barrage of DMs and emails had been her way of letting off steam, although I wished she'd vented it on someone else.

"So what exactly is this 'external element' hoping to accomplish? There are no stars to gain during this event, so I don't see why other wards would care."

"You're right, but that's exactly why I suspect you're the target. There's a chance that some anonymous person is wriggling their way into the contest to take you down. Logic dictates that it could be someone from the Third or Eighth Ward who's got a grudge against you. However, that's just speculation for now. As a Seven Star, just about everyone on the island wants to get at you."

"..."

I gulped at the provost's matter-of-fact analysis. I was aware of the dangers of my position, though. A transfer student taking down the Empress, Sarasa Saionji, and becoming a Seven Star faster than anyone else gathered attention like nothing else. It was safe to assume everyone on the Academy dreamed of besting me. There wasn't much point reminding me of that now.

"*Phew...*" I took a deep breath to clear my mind. "Okay, I understand so far. What's the second thing?"

"Oh, right. The second thing concerns Unique Stars."

"Huh?"

I blinked at that, surprised.

Stars on the Academy didn't have different colors, save a small subset of no more than a dozen. These Unique Stars were more difficult to obtain than normal ones, but each provided the owner with a special ability.

That wasn't all that made them important, either. Since I was posing as a Seven Star, I wasn't allowed to obtain more stars. On paper, I had seven, and that was the max. However, the system made an exception for Unique Stars, allowing me to obtain as many of those as I wanted. To an outsider, that didn't change my rank, but my actual standing (I was presently a Two Star) did increase, bringing me one step closer to being a real, noncheating Seven Star. For that reason, I was always looking for info on Unique Stars.

“Heh-heh...”

I’m sure the provost knew I’d be interested in this topic.

“This is a good opportunity,” she continued, still grinning. “Let’s start with the basics. Originally, there was one Unique Star for each of the schools on the Academy. It was up to the provost of each to decide who got their Unique Star. For the most part, they were given to the best students at each school—the president of the student council, or whoever won some event or did the best in exams, for example. Those stars could be won or lost in Games like any others, so after a while they went to completely unrelated people. But in the beginning, each school possessed one of them.”

“I see...”

“When a student with a Unique Star graduates, that star is returned to the school it belonged to originally. No matter how far away that star wanders, it’ll always come back home eventually, so to speak. That’s one of their traits. And I think you’ve picked up on this by now, but Eimei is no exception. Its star is green, and its owner graduated last year. Currently, it’s stored on our servers. At least, it was...”

“Huh? You mean...”

I gave the provost a concerned look.

“That’s right.” The provost nodded. “Someone’s taken it. Our normal custom is to award the Unique Star to whoever wins the Fourth Ward Challenge, but someone’s swiped it before the event.”

“Oh...”

“Don’t look at me like that. I didn’t screw up.”

“I never said that. Is a Unique Star really so easy to steal?”

“No way. Such precious data is stored on a stand-alone server not connected to any network. There’s no physical conduit to break into. Not typically. The star was temporarily migrated somewhere else in preparation for being awarded to the winner in a week. And that’s exactly when someone hacked into the system. It was a pinpoint attack.”

“Wow... Th-that’s really big news, isn’t it?!”

“To put it mildly.” The provost sighed as she lifted two fingers into the air. “Those are the two weird phenomena we’ve been dealing with. We don’t know if they’re related, but they’ve occurred at nearly the same time, so there’s a good chance the same person or group is responsible.”

“I see. Yeah, those are both serious concerns. Why tell me about all this, though?”

“Are you that dense? Why do you think? I want you to help find the culprit.”

“Uh... But...”

I couldn’t manage a response. A concerning shadow loomed over the upcoming event, but surviving the 4WC was already going to be a challenge. I wasn’t sure I had the extra capacity in my head to worry about anything else at the moment...

“Shinohara.”

However, the provost cut off my anxious musings, legs boldly crossed before me.

“Think about it. This adversary is using the 4WC to get at you. If you stay in the event long enough, they’re bound to take some kind of action. I’m not asking you to be a detective and hunt for clues... Like I said, there’s a very good chance this enemy of ours possesses a Unique Star—the green one you would have won after beating everyone in the 4WC. Heh-heh. I think you understand what that means, don’t you?”

“...”

She’d laid it all out for me, so of course I understood. Basically, if I wanted that Unique Star, I had to take it back myself. That green star, the prize for winning the 4WC, was no longer in the school’s possession. The only way to get it was to cooperate. And like the provost said, the mastermind behind this was liable to strike at me even if I refused to go along with her plan. It was far better for me to seize the initiative.

“Can I assume you’re ready for this?”

“I guess so, yeah. I’ll do it.”

“Great. In that case, Shinohara, you’ve got *three* missions. Expose whoever’s trying to meddle with the Fourth Ward Challenge, recover the stolen Unique Star, *and* make absolutely sure you win the 4WC to solidify your position as best on the Academy. I’ll help you out in any way I’m able to.”

With that, my job was set in stone. Winning the 4WC had always been mandatory, but now I had to deal with some mysterious interference and a Unique Star bandit. There was no telling if those issues were being caused by the same person, but the party or parties involved were bound to be tough.

Suddenly, something occurred to me. “I’m not sure about the person setting off alarms, but a student probably stole the star, right?” I blurted out. “And I’m sure they’re using some kind of illegal means. I kind of wish a student that capable was working with me.”

“Don’t get any ideas. Whoever’s behind the theft is ruthless. They’d turn on you eventually.”

“Ahh... Well, I wasn’t being too serious.”

I shook my head, laughing off the idea, then stood. Taking on additional work when I was already handling something difficult... Part of me wondered why I was being such an idiot. At the same time, I couldn’t let such an excellent chance slip through my fingers. If I hoped to become a real Seven Star, this was exactly what I needed. I had to win the 4WC and show everyone I was the undisputed Academy champion. There was no choice but to pull off what the provost asked and obtain my third Unique Star, after the red and blue ones I already possessed.

I’ll just have to do it all. If I can’t manage this, how can I go around calling myself the best?

One side of my lips quirked up in a grin as I gave myself that pep talk.

There was only a day until the weeklong Fourth Ward Challenge began.

Tell Me, Himeji!



What are the rules of the Fourth Ward Challenge?

The Fourth Ward Challenge (4WC) is an event held near the start of every academic year at Eimei School. It's how the school chooses the team that will compete against others in the Interward League, and it also helps introduce new students to the Game and star systems. Simply put, it's a game of survival. Whoever makes it to the end wins. And we can't afford to lose...no matter what.

Rule 1: The event lasts one week

The 4WC begins tomorrow (Thursday) and continues for a week. If multiple participants remain eligible on the final day, the winner will be decided via a special round-robin tournament.

Rule 2: Competition takes place via Trials, not Games

During this special event, students challenge each other to Trials instead of the normal Games. Trials cannot be refused; they are automatically accepted upon arrival.

Rule 3: Challenges can only be sent on school grounds from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

The Trial command is only available at the correct place and time. However, once a Trial is issued, the competition itself can be held wherever and whenever the competitors prefer.

Rule 4: Ditching a Trial = Automatic elimination

While you are "In Combat" (engaged in a Trial with someone else), you cannot receive more challenges from other players. If a Trial does not progress after twenty-four hours of participants being "In Combat," both players are knocked out of the event.

Chapter 2

War, and Running from It

#

“Hahhh... Hahhh!”

The sound of ragged breathing flowed past my ears. My heartbeat felt so loud that I was tempted to close my eyes.

“Ngh...”

Himeji lay before me in her Eimei uniform. Her face was turned away, and she was fighting to silence her breathing. Despite our predicament, it was a captivating sight. The sound of rubbing fabric as she writhed snaked around my eardrums.

“...Himeji, you’re still making noise. Can you keep from doing that?”

“Ah... Y-yes. I’ll...I’ll try!”

She nodded briskly at me. Her back was against the classroom floor as though she’d been pushed down. Not even she could keep perfectly serene in this situation. Her cheeks were a little red, and her eyes were moist. I felt bad...but she had to endure this for now.

“Just hold out until our pursuer gives up,” I pleaded softly, sweating like mad. “I’m sorry. Just a little bit longer!”

“...! (*nod nod nod*)”

Himeji looked just as frazzled as I surely did. We were a couple of inches from each other, my body pretty much on top of hers, and thanks to that, we were already touching in all kinds of places. But we couldn’t be concerned about that. We had to keep our voices down and figure out a way through this.

After about three minutes...

“Is he gone...?”

I lifted myself up, carefully listening for footsteps outside the classroom. Keeping my head low, I peered out the window into the hallway. Nobody down one side; nobody down the other. To be doubly sure, I took out my device and launched the Company-developed detector app. It told me there were no other devices powered on nearby.

“Phew...”

“Master? Is it okay to get up?”

“Oh... Yeah. Sorry.”

I hurriedly offered Himeji a hand. A moment later, I was lifting her off the floor. We’d been lying in an aisle between desks so that no one would see us from the hall. Fleeing into a classroom to escape our pursuer had been a wise decision, but one made in desperation. Thanks to all but jumping through the doorway, I’d wound up tangled with Himeji, nearly flattening her with my body. We couldn’t straighten out because we had to remain absolutely quiet, so I’d stayed in a push-up position to keep from touching her as much as possible. Between that and the rhythmic breathing that made my sanity melt, this was becoming a pretty tough mission.

“Are you hurt, Himeji? Sorry about that. I wish I coulda been the one on the bottom for you...”

“No, I fell first, so there’s no cause to apologize. Besides, you got your arms around me as I dropped to keep me from getting injured.”

“That’s a relief...”

Apparently, Himeji didn’t mind that we’d gotten tangled up, so I wasn’t going to dwell on it.

“...This event’s a lot harder than I thought it’d be.” I sighed as I patted the dust off my uniform.

After discussing strategy for Eimei School’s Fourth Ward Challenge, we’d concluded that this would basically be a never-ending game of hide-and-seek for us. If we were caught in a Trial, we wouldn’t have much time to prepare, so figuring out a (cheat-assisted) way to win would be tough. As a result, we aimed to reduce the number of battles to the bare minimum. Unfortunately, I was the

object of a lot of attention. When asked by an LNN survey which student they wanted to challenge to a Trial during the event, just over seven thousand people had replied “Hiroto Shinohara.” The idea of fighting several thousand bouts in a row, even with Himeji’s help, was too unreal to consider.

We’d spent the past two days preparing and collecting the things we needed to make a clean escape. This included two vital new programs: Detect Devices, which gave the coordinates of all the other event participants, and Basic Jamming, an Ability that blocked the Trial requests that piled up during the breaks between class periods, although only for a few precious moments.

“There are just too many people... We’re constantly on the run at school.”

“You’re right. Even compared to the usual scope of the event, things are pretty intense this year. I’m sure the thought of playing a no-risk Game against a Seven Star is emboldening a lot of students. Losing a Trial knocks you out of the 4WC, but you don’t have to worry about forfeiting stars.”

“I get that, but...”

I knit my brow. Something didn’t add up. Sure, the 4WC lacked the risk of losing stars, but it was still an important event for Eimei School students. Blindly rushing me didn’t seem like the smart call if someone wanted to finish high in the standings.

“There’s no point stewing on it, I guess. We’ve made it through another class break. If we keep this up, we should be good.”

“That’s true. It’s a game of survival, so we *should* see the player total dwindle before long... Barring unforeseen events, I think we can avoid playing in any Trials until the final stages.”

Himeji and I nodded at each other, bodies still close. We enjoyed the last few moments of peace before we had to return to class.

Things began to go awry around two hours later, right after the start of the lunch break.

Hmm...?

My hand was in my pocket, reaching for my device so I could block the

expected deluge of Trial requests I was bound to receive in mere moments. Then it stopped. Something was weird. The Basic Jamming program, something I could activate with a single touch, wasn't opening. Instead, I felt my device vibrating slightly.

Why? Don't tell me I'm getting a notification now, of all times? Is that keeping it from starting Basic Jamming?!

Upon realizing that possibility, I frantically pulled out my device, but it was too late.

"Shinohara, I'd like to challenge you, please!"

"...!"

By the time I had my finger on the screen, Tatara, who sat in front of me, had turned around and pointed her device at me, a look of glee on her face.

W-wait! Wait, wait, wait, wait!

Internally, I screamed with despair, but I kept it cool on the outside while checking my screen. I clung to the feeble hope that some kind of error had prevented her Trial request from going through. Unfortunately, reality could be damn cruel sometimes. Tatara's Trial had already gone through. So ended the great escape.

"Yes! Couldn't get away from me *this* time, could ya? *Phew!*"

"I had no idea you were so aggressive, Tatara."

"Usually, I'm not. But I'm never gonna get a chance to really play against you otherwise, Shinohara! I'm class president, so I gotta prove I can hold my own once in a while! Woo!"

Tatara leaned toward me in her seat, smiling from ear to ear; her ponytail bounced around as she basked in the joy of this achievement. I, meanwhile, played it perfectly calm. However, the unease in my heart threatened to destroy me.

I never thought it'd come crumbling down this fast... Damn! What happened?

I silently checked my device to determine the source of the notification. It turned out it was a message sent to my account on STOC. My STOC notifications

should have been shut off, though. I had no idea why this one made it through, but it showed up at just the right time to lock me out of Basic Jamming.

I opened the message while fantasizing about what I'd do to the provost if it came from her.

From: Noa Akizuki

Message: Hee-hee! Sup? It's nothing ♡

"..."

The completely unexpected message caused my mind to go blank for a second. *"Nothing"*? *What's up with that?* Maybe Akizuki was looking for a little online attention from me, but we'd only met for the first time yesterday. And this timing felt so precise, like she was carefully aiming through a sniper's scope. Her shot was successful, too, because Tatara got a challenge through.

Is...Akizuki onto my strategy? Did she shoot it down on purpose?

I couldn't be sure of anything, but the idea seemed plausible enough. Ratcheting up my caution by a few notches seemed prudent.

"Um...uh, Shinohara? I-I'm sorry. Are you...not into this?"

Tatara had misinterpreted why I had my face lowered, and she gave me an apologetic look colored with a bit of shame. Upon seeing this, I quickly realized it was time to move on. I could mope all I wanted, but the Trial had gotten through. There was no way to undo it. Akizuki had to wait. I needed to concentrate on this.

"...(gulp!)"

I stole a peek at Himeji next to me. She'd turned a bit in my direction, and she nodded at me slightly. Kagaya was on standby in my ear as well. I had all the support I could ask for. I wasn't about to lose *that* easily.

"Oh, sorry, you're fine. It's just that getting targeted by so many people has been a little tiresome, that's all. There's no backing down from a challenge, though. We could do it now, or... Actually, how about after school?"

"R-really?!"

“Really. But promise me this, Tatara...don’t cry after losing, okay?”

“I...I...”

Just as I’d expected, the Trial ended almost as quickly as it began.

“I lost!”

““““Whooooaaaaahhhh!!””””

The moment the quivering Tatara got the words out, a roar of two parts—admiration and shock—erupted from the audience packing the 2-A classroom. Tatara’s chosen game for our Trial had been something she called 4D Sevens. It was a complicated yet weirdly well-balanced variation of the card game Sevens, except played with Japanese *hanafuda* cards.

“Ugh. So much for that,” Tatara moaned while wiping sweat from her brow in a very contrived way. “I felt pretty confident about this...but I couldn’t do a thing against you.”

“Well, sometimes it just comes down to ability. The new rules are pretty nice, though. I think you had the right strategy.”

“You really think so?! Wow, wow! Shinohara praised me! Woo-hoo!”

Tatara lifted both arms in the air, throwing her already hyper demeanor into overdrive. I pulled my eyes away from her large chest, which bounced up and down as she pumped her fists.

No, it wasn’t bad at all... In fact, I normally would’ve lost big.

Fuuka Tatara was president of my class for a reason. She was good. Kagaya’s kind support had ensured that all my card draws were manipulated. Without cheating, I’m sure I would’ve had a rough time.

In terms of sheer playing talent, Tatara was a far cry from someone like Saionji or Kugasaki. However, the tough thing about this event was how low the stakes seemed to be for everyone else. To them, it was a fun diversion. A Trial held as part of the Fourth Ward Challenge wasn’t a full-on Game. Losing presented no genuine risk, so naturally, people approached this differently. They were less careful with their moves, dared to take gambles they’d typically never dream of—that kind of do-or-die approach was actually a good one for

the 4WC. Unfortunately, it left someone like me, who couldn't afford to lose once, between a rock and a hard place.

"This is so great...! And I *know* you're gonna win this now, Hiroto! I know it!"

"..."

I stood quietly, unable to quell the shame I felt when Tatara stared at me with such bright eyes. A moment later, the chime for five o'clock rang over the school PA system. The conclusion of the day's battles aligning with my first Trial victory seemed to be a coincidence, but the Company and I had timed that intentionally. So ended the 4WC's first day.

#

"It's ready, Master."

The voice was pure, and the teacup was just as alluring.

After my Trial with Tatara concluded, Himeji and I returned home, no longer worrying about being spotted. Off school grounds and outside the specified hours, no requests would come our way. That was probably the nicest thing about the 4WC's rules. Still, between running like mad during all the breaks between class periods and being mentally exhausted by the battle with Tatara (not that I allowed it to show), I was pretty spent. That's why I was currently waiting to use the bath.

"Oh, thank you."

I took a sip of Himeji's tea. She usually made it with no sugar for me, but there was just a bit of sweetness to it this time, perhaps to help pep me up.

"Ahh... This sure is good. Nothing like hot tea at a time like this."

"Yes, Master, hot tea when you're tired is a time-proven approach. But are you sure you don't mind that I took a bath first? I know you insisted, but I really think that you should have taken priority."

"You really don't need to worry about stuff like that. How could I force you to change into your maid outfit and start cleaning or doing laundry while already sweaty? I'd feel terrible."

"Oh... Yes, a master who forced that upon a maid would be seen as rather

sexually deviant, I suppose. My apologies.”

Himeji gave me a humble bow, although I spied a small grin on her face. Her well-brushed, shiny silver hair fanned out around her shoulders. A faint scent of shampoo met my nostrils. I hadn’t meant it the way she suggested, but I was still glad to skirt being labeled a pervert. Himeji had told me earlier that she appreciated taking a bath first, so I decided to take the jab as a way to hide a bit of bashfulness from gratitude.

Lifting her head, Himeji looked right at me with her piercing blue eyes. “Congratulations on making it through day one, Master. That’s one-seventh of the event behind us. What do you think of the results?”

“Mmm... Well, I’m glad that Detect Devices and Basic Jamming were so effective. Good thing we thought to get those set up in advance. But man, people are way more eager than I expected.”

“They are, yes. I did some investigation earlier, and I found that the number of survivors—people who haven’t been knocked out yet—has already dropped below five thousand. There are around nine thousand people in high school at Eimei, so that means almost half of them are already out. You rarely see so many eliminations this early.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” I said, crossing my arms. “Also, not to change the subject, but I’m still worried about that message I got.”

I closed my eyes. That STOC message, the one that had prevented me from dodging Tatara’s challenge... It had arrived with such perfect timing and included an odd message.

“I’m almost certain that was intentional. Akizuki’s deduced that I plan to dodge everyone, and she chose the exact right moment to send that message.”

“Mm... Do you think Ms. Akizuki could be the mastermind scheming after something behind the scenes?”

“I can’t be sure of that yet,” I replied, choosing my words carefully. “Maybe she’s just trying to knock out the Seven Star early so she’ll finish higher. She hasn’t done anything against the rules... It’s definitely fishy, though.”

Certainly, Akizuki was acting suspicious, but it was too early to toss around

accusations. The 4WC demanded my attention more. Tomorrow promised new hide-and-seek antics, and since this was a knockout event, those who remained in the game would be the most formidable opponents.

“Yes, you’re right.” Himeji nodded, the ends of her argent hair slipping from her shoulders. “Given the trends that are surfacing, I worry that we may be unable to dodge Trials until the final day. So...I’ve actually been working with the Company on a certain additional feature for your device.”

“Oh... You have? When? You were with me all day.”

“I... Yes, but it’s a bit embarrassing when you phrase it like that, Master. Anyway, I’m not the electronics engineer in the Company. I think she’ll be here soon, though...or right now, actually.”

When Himeji looked up at the clock, the familiar doorbell chime rang. I looked at the intercom screen that displayed the front door and spied a girl I knew waving amicably. I worked the panel to unlock the door, and a few seconds later, she entered.

“Okay, we’re all set, Hiro! Doing well? How ’bout you, Shirayuki? Here, I got a nice souvenir for you!”

“Kagaya, my volume control isn’t responding. Is this a bug?”

“Nooooo, Shirayuki! I’m the real Kagaya, not the one you see on a screen all the time! And you’re not tuning your volume control; you’re pinching my cheek!”

“Hmm,” Himeji got in a few more squeezes. “That’s odd. Now it’s louder than ever.”

“Agh! Agh! Stop it, you *know* you’re being silly...!”

“...”

Kagaya clutched a box tightly while the slightly younger Himeji pinched her repeatedly. Kagaya worked for the Company like Himeji but was a lot more casual in her speech and attire. Tracksuits and sweats seemed to comprise the bulk of her wardrobe. She generally avoided makeup, and her hair always made her look like she’d just gotten out of bed... Basically, Kagaya was the archetypal

slacker big-sis type. She did keep herself clean, yet going by her conduct, you couldn't help but wonder how she'd shine if she tried a bit. Still, she was an expert with computers and portable devices. I'd been relying on her since I fell into lying about being a Seven Star.

"Phew! What a way to welcome someone, Shirayuki. Guess you've entered your rebellious phase of puberty, huh? Time sure flies by fast."

Kagaya, free at last from Himeji's grasp, spun around to place her box on the table.

"Oh..."

Inside were three cream puffs—exquisite baked pastries. A rough cookie glaze covered each light shell teeming with cream and strawberries. Kagaya took a moment to marvel at them.

"Heh-heh-heh! Well? What do you think? I'm about to break Insta with these things! I know I kinda slept on the job a bit yesterday, Hiro, so I bought these to make up for it!"

"Wow... They look really good. Can I have one?"

"Oh, don't be shy, Hiro! And you, too, Shirayuki! Aren't these your *faaavorite*?"

"...I won't deny that. I hate to say it, but I feel like my admiration for you is growing by the day, Kagaya. Hmm. This logo... Isn't this that new bakery over in the Seventeenth Ward? Don't tell me you were out touring the island while we were in the 4WC trenches..."

"Ah! Um... No. I supported you the whole time, didn't I? Giving you escape routes, programming while I was waiting in line and stuff... It was fine!"

"I won't ignore your contributions. But did you have to go by yourself?"

"Now I get it. You're pouting because I didn't take you."

"I am not."

"Awwwwwww! Are you seeing this, Hiro? She's so cute!"

"I—I am not cute!"

Himeji had meant to pour some hot coffee for Kagaya, but now she clutched her silver tray to her chest, scowling in the cutest way possible. Kagaya took it all in as one might when beholding a miracle. Then she grabbed a strawberry from one of the cream puffs and brought it to Himeji's mouth.

"Ah... N-not in front of my master..."

"Hiro is just as enthusiastic about this as I am, okay? C'mon!"

"I"

Kagaya, never taking her eyes off Himeji, wasted no time pushing that little strawberry on her. Himeji resisted for a moment, but ultimately yielded. Her eyes widened and her expression brightened with each chew. Kagaya took that as a signal to pat the other girl on the head, carding her fingers through Himeji's locks.

"Your hair is as beautiful as ever... I'm floored."

"Please don't stare at her so intently, Kagaya. It leaves me unsure how to react."

"Whaaat? How can you say that, Hiro? You pushed her to the ground at school."

"That was an accident!"

I tried to defend myself against the accusation Kagaya lobbed at me with a grin. The Company saw everything I did while assisting me. I was glad I hadn't tried anything untoward.

"A-anyway...you have something to show us, right, Kagaya? All you've done so far is pick on us."

At this rate, we wouldn't get anywhere, so I decided to get us back on track.

"Oh, right." After clapping once, she retrieved her laptop from a bag. "Here's what I wanted to do. Let's see, work, work... Oh, you should have a seat, too, Shirayuki. This might take a bit."

"In that case, I could start on dinner..."

"Nah, nah, you're good. Let your big sis help out with that later."



“...Do you even know how to hold a knife, Kagaya?”

It wasn't surprising to learn that Kagaya wasn't much of a cook. Himeji received Kagaya's offer with a bit of reluctance. Still, she took a chair beside me. Sitting next to each other had become normal for us. Himeji had come a long way since the days of picking chairs three spots from mine. Something about that change had me feeling a little odd.

Kagaya smiled. Had she noticed that difference in our seating arrangement? “Now, I have a general idea of what happened to you both today...and what I saw indicates that reaching the end with our current programs will be tough.”

“That's true. My Basic Jamming was overridden, and there were more pursuers than anticipated...,” I said.

“Right, right. So, to address those concerns, I've come up with a new program. I call it...Body Swap!”

“Body Swap?”

The horror movie-style phrase startled me a bit. Swapping identities with Himeji at school would be pretty amusing, but I didn't think it would solve much.

“So,” I said as I heeded Kagaya's beckoning and gave my device to her, “what does this do, exactly?”

“Right, well, let me start at the beginning. First, as I think you know by now, requesting a Trial during the Fourth Ward Challenge is a bit different from a normal Game. You have to get close to your target, generally around ten feet, point your device at them, and then tap the button that pops up. That'll send the challenge over.”

“Right...”

“That means this event must be using your device's location data for Trial establishment. Like, reading the x/y/z coordinates to figure out who you're calling to battle. This new program I came up with is meant to meddle with that.”

“Meddle? How so?”

“Well, it’s kind of a new application of the Display Bug thing we used in that Game against the Phoenix. Basically, it totally rewrites your location data, Hiro. Starting tomorrow, it’ll be impossible for anyone to challenge you. That alone would make it obvious that you’re cheating, though. So I figured we’d have your coordinates overlap with Shirayuki’s.”

“So any challenge I receive will be shunted to Himeji?”

“You got it! That’s why I call it Body Swap. I’m ever so slightly altering your location data so every Trial request you get goes to Himeji’s device instead. She’ll be taking those challenges for you. Naturally, this will stop working if she’s knocked out of the event, but I think it’ll make it a lot easier to dodge people.”

“Wow...” I couldn’t help but give a word of praise. Honestly, it felt bad to use Himeji as a human shield, but this would be an effective strategy.

“Of course, Shirayuki will need to remain with you at every waking moment, Hiro. Otherwise, people will suspect there’s a program bug, and we might get found out. Pretty nice side benefit, eh, Hiro?”

“Yeah, yeah... Himeji, are you okay with this? Body Swap sounds like a lot of extra work for you...”

“Does it? If anything, the thought of helping you out makes me happy.”

“Um, well, great, then.”

I brought a hand to my temple. I hadn’t expected such an immediate, honest reply from Himeji. Now that she was on board, Kagaya’s new feature would hopefully buy me another two or three days at least. Even if someone backdoored their way around Basic Jamming with another well-placed notification, Body Swap would stop them. Having a second layer of defense to fall back on was nice, even though we hadn’t needed it today. If things continued as they were, perhaps I had a chance at surviving until the seventh day. That was assuming there were no big upsets, of course.

Something unexpected is bound to happen, but we’ll just have to do our best.

Oddly enough, that was a comforting thought. Kagaya regarded me with a perky smile. She must have finished installing Body Swap on our devices.

“There! Yep, I gotta say, this is a perfect job on my part. You both should be all set!”

“Thanks, Kagaya. Um...this one’s mine. Here, Himeji.”

“Oh, thank you.”

I gave Himeji her device back while also taking my own. She accepted it with two hands, like it was a precious, fragile object, and smiled a little.

“Heh-heh! Great job, Kagaya. I can always rely on you at times like this.”

“Oof... Your compliments feel like daggers in my heart. Anyway, it’s no problem. ’Cause I’m a real smart person, y’know? The golden child of her time! A once-in-a-century—”

“I know. You don’t have to go on.”

“Ahh! Now you’re trying to brush me off! I think it’s time to get you off your high horse, Shirayuki! I challenge you to a cooking contest! You’ll be the judge, Hiro!”

Immediately, Kagaya sprinted for the kitchen. Himeji paled at the sight and quickly stood.

“W-wait a minute, Kagaya! Remember, you’re not supposed to cook eggs with the shells on—”

“H-help! Help, Shirayuki! Smoke! I see smoke! I didn’t do anything wrong, and I see smoke!”

“...Ugh!”

Himeji hurried to the kitchen.

“Uh... Stay calm, guys!”

I chuckled a little as I watched her go. Now alone, I thought over the day’s events.

It’s pretty clear that Akizuki needs to be watched closely. But the provost said that some external element was worming its way in. That can’t be her, right? Or maybe she’s an accomplice...

I couldn’t be sure. However, if Akizuki was involved, there was an excellent

chance she possessed the green Unique Star I'd heard about. A Six Star with a unique star would be higher than the Phoenix, Seiran Kugasaki. Akizuki might have as much power as a Seven Star. It was discouraging, to say the least.

"If she's after me, she'll definitely try something tomorrow. Better brace myself."

"No, no, I know *that* much, Shirayuki. One tablespoon, right? That's about *this* much, so... Whoa! It got away... Ahhh, my eyes!"

"..."

Given all the shouting and screaming coming from the kitchen, I wondered if I should fear for my life as well as my fate in the event.

Fourth Ward Challenge: End of Day 1

Knocked out: 4,472 Survivors: 4,627

#

Friday, the second day of the 4WC.

The Himeji Barrier, the nickname I'd surreptitiously given to the Body Swap application that Kagaya had set up last night, was working well. No Trial requests had reached me so far.

Classes were over, and the clock showed around half past four. Himeji was out in the courtyard, tackling one of the Trials she'd taken in my place while I departed from school grounds safely. I followed one of our planned escape routes. Eimei School sported a pretty wide campus, so there were several ornate gated entrances besides the main one. During the 4WC, these gates were prime ambush locations. That's what Provost Ichinose said, anyway.

Instead, I opted for a service entrance, a staff-only back way that wasn't known to students or marked on any map. It was situated deep in the club activities building. Honestly, I didn't remember the exact way to it, but Kagaya had been kind enough to lead me to the door.

"...!"

"Whoa! ...Ouch."

Just as I arrived, I nearly crashed into a girl who'd come jogging in the other

direction. I pulled back, but a moment too late. The girl bounced off my chest with a *whump*. The effect was similar to someone giving me a full-body tackle (or glomping, really), and the aroma of sweet citrus I picked up at this point-blank range was intoxicating.

“Hee-hee...”

The girl, whose arms were wrapped around me, looked up and gave an embarrassed smile.

“Sorry I ran into you! I can be clumsy like that sometimes... Oh, it’s you, Hiroto!”

Her eyes widened in evident recognition. Her face was almost too immature for someone a year older than I, and those twin ponytails were unfairly adorable.

“Noa Akizuki...?”

I was frozen for a moment, but stating that name restarted my brain. This was the girl who’d blocked my Basic Jamming with that cryptic, impeccably timed message. I still didn’t know if she had done it on purpose, but she was my prime suspect. And now she’d latched on to me, as though to block my way.

“Uh... Wait, what? Why?!”

That was Kagaya, speaking through my earpiece.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, Hiro! I watched your surroundings closely all day! I didn’t pick up any other devices until a moment ago... And why does she know this route?!”

“...”

I mulled this over while listening to Kagaya defend herself. This couldn’t be an accident. Akizuki had clearly meant for this to happen.

“Hiya, Hiroto!” Akizuki beamed cheerfully. She brought her little right hand up to my chest, all but clinging to me as she looked up. “Hee-hee! What a coincidence! ♡ Are you okay? Not hurt or anything?”

“No, I’m fine. Can you move away a bit, Akizuki?”

“Aww, you don’t have to be so cold... Oh, wait! Don’t tell me my body temperature’s getting you all excited, Hiroto! Hee-hee! I get it, I get it. Having such a cute girl squeeze against you must make you nervous, right? All self-conscious and stuff?”

“I didn’t say that.”

It’s because you’re too close... Too close and touching too much of me!

I narrowed my eyes at Akizuki, who was busy complimenting herself again, and decided I had to peel her off. Taking hold of her delicate shoulder with my right hand, I applied enough pressure to push her away gently.

“Whoa, whoa! ...Aww, don’t be so forceful! ♪”

With an innocent snicker, she put her hands behind her back, leaning forward a little as she raised an eyebrow at me. Looking up at people with those puppy-dog eyes from any angle must have been a skill of hers.

This is bad...

Externally, I kept it cool, as befitting my position as the Academy’s best. However, my mind was a swirling whirlpool of panic. I’d run into the one person I needed to avoid at the worst possible time. Himeji was far away, so if Akizuki challenged me here, there was a very high possibility we’d be exposed as cheaters. With Himeji in the middle of a Trial, it would appear to Akizuki that I was engaged in one. Technically, that was possible, but it’d look suspicious. If I was in a Trial, why was I slinking around a back exit trying to avoid people?

Shit... Now what? What’s the right move? How can I talk my way out of this...?!

My thoughts raced. Suddenly, Akizuki took a step toward me.

“Hee-hee! Hey, Hiroto...is something bothering you?”

“_____”

It was a casual question, asked in the most casual of ways, but Akizuki’s eyes seemed to be calling me an idiot. They had this indecipherable atmosphere to them, as though they could peer right through any front I put up.

“You’ve been running, right?” she continued, a bewitchingly cute smile on her

face. “Running for your life, kinda. But now that I’m here, you’re in a tough spot. I bet you’re wondering how you’re gonna get out of this. Hee-hee-hee! C’mon, Hiroto! ♪ You’re frightened of someone as cute as I am? What kind of young man would ever be afraid of me, huh? ♡”

“What’re you talking about? I just don’t want to go through the trouble of accepting Trials from a million people. If I look like I’m panicking, you should probably get your eyes checked.”

“Oh, really? Well, all right. I’m not about to challenge you anyway. I’m too tired for it today. *Fwaaah...*”

She brought a hand to her mouth, letting out a cheek-stretching yawn that seemed emphasized to convey her point. She didn’t appear to be lying, either. Five o’clock was fast approaching, but Akizuki wasn’t holding her device, and she didn’t make any move to grab it.

What’s...going on?

I winced internally, frustrated that I couldn’t discern Akizuki’s objective. She’d set up this perfect situation, yet chose to toss it away. The questions were piling up. This went beyond my understanding.

“Mm...?”

Akizuki’s demeanor shifted. Anything suspicious faded, and she became wholly calm and unthreatening. She looked around the hallway, then shot me a questioning expression.

“Oh, she’s not with you today. That maid, I mean. Don’t tell me she left you or something? Hee-hee! I see, I see... Well, don’t worry. Let Noa cheer you up! ♡”

“I already told you she’s not my girlfriend. And we’re not together every second of the day. We just happen to be doing our own separate things right now.”

“Hmm. It sure looked like you were an item when I saw you guys. Like...if you’re not, then what do you think of your maid, Hiroto?”

Akizuki kept her eyes fixed on me as she posed her question. I wasn’t sure of the intent behind the inquiry, and that was all the more reason to be extra

careful. What did Shirayuki Himeji mean to Hiroto Shinohara?

“Well...we’re teammates. Kind of.”

“Teammates...? Mmm.” Akizuki smiled at me. “Okay. Thanks, Hiroto. See you later! ♪”

She gave me a little wave, then spun and practically skipped away. Not a moment later, the bell rang for five, indicating the end of day two.

“Phew...”

My shoulders slumped as the tension left my body. I leaned against the wall. We’d only talked, but the effort had felt Herculean. After bringing a hand to my neck, I realized I was sweating.

Then I got a voice call from Himeji.

“That marks the end of the second day, Master. I finished my Trial a moment ago.”

“Oh... Good job. Everything go well?”

“Well, I was pretty aggressive, yet at the end, my opponent smiled and said, ‘Thank you very much.’ A very odd person indeed. Did something happen, Master? You sound out of breath.”

“Ah... Well, I’ll talk about it once we’re back home.”

I wasn’t trying to hide it or anything, but I didn’t want to risk someone overhearing. I was still a little shaken, so it was best to collect myself at home first.

“Oh, all right.”

Himeji sounded a tiny bit worried, but she didn’t object. Perhaps she understood what I meant. Something must have occurred to her, because she abruptly changed the subject.

“By the way, Master, around half an hour ago, we saw the strangest thing. Twenty participants were knocked out at once in a corner of the club activities building. Apparently, they were attempting to cheat the system as a group.”

“...Cheat the system?”

“Yes. What I’m told is that they were sharing an illegal Ability that allowed them to appear as though they’d been eliminated from the competition, preventing anyone from issuing Trials to them. They used it to avoid all challenges yesterday, but they were all eliminated today.”

“Defeated? Not disqualified?”

“That’s what it looks like, yes. The illegal Ability was only discovered by the administration after the fact.”

“...Do you think those cheaters were the outside element the provost hinted at?”

“I don’t think so, no. The board said they saw no evidence of meddling from other wards, so it’s likely something different. I can’t guarantee this was completely unrelated, however.”

“Oh... Well, hopefully you’re right. This occurred in the club activities building?”

I crossed my arms for a moment, gathering my thoughts. Hadn’t Akizuki come running from the direction of the twenty-person elimination? It matched up time-wise, and it would explain her supposed exhaustion. Plus, given Akizuki’s talents, I could imagine her dispatching a group of rule breakers before staff got involved.

“...”

All of this was supposition for the time being. Regardless, the day was done. There were shadows looming in the distance, but I was still in the competition.

Fourth Ward Challenge: End of Day 2

Knocked out: 1,483 Survivors: 3,144

#

The next day was Saturday, and while the 4WC was still in effect, a participant would never receive any challenges unless they had to go to school for team practice or the like. It was the only real break during the event. Naturally, I had zero interest in visiting Eimei School. A day of aggressively lazing around at home followed, interrupted—

“Hey, Shinohara, got a moment?”

—by a call from the (fake) rich girl Saionji after dark.

“Listen, are you free tomorrow? It’s Sunday, so you shouldn’t have to worry about the Eimei event.

“I want you to join me for some shopping... Hey, you don’t have to sound that reluctant about it. This is your fault. Taking my red star left me weakened, so I need to go out and buy an Ability or two to make up for it. Not the big-store stuff, either. Custom apps.

“...Yeah, but the shop I want to visit is kind of, you know...not so mainstream. I can’t go by myself, so I want you to accompany me. Maybe you’ll find a useful Ability while you’re there.

“...Right? Hee-hee! Perfect, then.

“Okay, I’ll meet you in front of School Gate Station in the Fourth Ward. Huh? No, the store’s in the Eighth Ward. I sent the location to you... Oh, what’s it matter where we meet up? That was just the first spot that came to mind; you don’t have to be so inquisitive about it. Look, we can meet at the store, if you insist...

“...You will? Okay, so the station, then? ...Oh, stop it! You never miss a chance to mock me, do you?

“I think this goes without saying, but you have to show up in disguise, all right? And definitely not in your school uniform... Actually, make an effort to dress nicely for a change, since you’re going out with a girl. I’m gonna go all out, too. Wait, never mind! You didn’t hear that! My maid was pushing this outfit on me, that’s all! It’s not like I’d ever buy new clothes because I’m soooo excited to go out with you or anything.

“...Listen...it’s not a date or anything... I just want your help since you’re my partner in crime, all right?

“...But there’s one thing you should know, Shinohara...

“When I say I’m looking forward to tomorrow, I’m not lying.”

Sunday, the fourth day of the 4WC. Following a very pressuring conversation,

I stood at the meeting point, looking around.

“So which one is Saionji?” I muttered to myself.

Sarasa Saionji—a girl who now held special importance in my life. She was a direct descendant of the Academy’s founder and the only daughter of its current grand headmaster. The girl was about as elite as spoiled little rich heiresses got. Until I fell backward into beating her, she was the invincible Empress, ruling the Academy as its only Seven Star.

As it happened, she was a liar, too. It was a little difficult to grasp, but technically, she wasn’t even Sarasa Saionji. The real Empress had been kidnapped around a year ago, and a girl named Rina Akabane had taken her place to keep the crime from becoming public knowledge. Except that the whole kidnapping thing was also a fabrication to fool the Saionji family. In reality, Rina had concocted this massive scheme so the real Sarasa could fulfill her wish to live a normal teenage life.

It was a bold, shameless, self-sacrificing, and utterly ridiculous lie, and the actual Sarasa was ignorant of parts of it. And somehow, the current Sarasa’s falsehoods were now entangled with mine. It’s a really long, twisted story, so I’ll skip the details, but basically, if her lies were exposed, then mine would be as well, and vice versa. Given all the deception, if anything came to light, our social lives would crumble before our eyes. Despite all that, or maybe because of it, we were acquaintances now, working together to keep ourselves safe.

That was our relationship—liars and partners in crime.

“Oh...”

Checking the time on the top of my device’s screen, I saw that it was nine forty-five in the morning. We weren’t due to meet until ten, but knowing how surprisingly conscientious Saionji could be, I had good reason to believe she was already here. However, she was also liable to be in an unfamiliar disguise. No sooner did that worry cross my mind than I wound up discovering her.

“Hey. You’re early.”

“Huh?”

I approached a girl playing with her device on a wooden bench in the middle

of the roundabout and sat down next to her. She stared at me for a bit, mouth agape. Perhaps this was a little too sudden for her. She peered at my face.

“Um...you’re Shinohara, right?”

“Yep. Why do you sound so unsure? Didn’t we dress this way the last time?”

“*You* did...but I’m wearing something completely different from the hoodie I had on. How did you spot me so fast?”

“Huh?”

I looked up, unsure how to parse the question, then took a closer look at Saionji. Golden catlike eyes. Blond hair that ran down to her knees. It wasn’t completely straight, curling gently at the ends to make cute little circles around where her socks began. She was dressed in a tidy, charming dress, like a young lady relaxing at a summer resort, and it all looked great on her. It was very different from the usual Sarasa Saionji, with her long red hair and ruby eyes.

“Weird...” She turned on her device’s front-facing cam, tilting her head around and puzzling to herself. “I don’t think this is a bad disguise at all. I had my maid check everything, and I actually passed by friends of mine from Ohga three times and none of them noticed.”

“I mean, yeah, you look totally different from usual, but...I dunno, maybe it’s your aura? One look told me it was you.”

“...! Oh... You noticed me that quickly? Hmmm...”

Saionji gave a satisfied smile and stood from the bench. When she faced me, her skirt fluttered in the air.

“Hee-hee! Well, let’s get going, Shinohara. We can’t waste the whole day just sitting here.”

“Huh? Oh... Yeah, I guess not.”

I stood to join her, a little perplexed about all this energy.

The Academy’s Eighth Ward apparently had a reputation for being a generally “underground” kind of place. It was a lot more alive at night than in the daytime, full of shops that walked the line between legal and breaking Academy regulations, which pitted it against the island’s Board of Morality pretty often.

Unofficial gambling dens and sex shops weren't uncommon, and a lot of outfits peddling unauthorized Abilities could be found in the area. Kugasaki's Self-Styled Holy Knights made the Eighth Ward their headquarters.

That said, the region wasn't some untamed hive of depravity. It just offered a lot of freedom. That's how Saionji put it to me on the train.

"...Here's our stop."

We had been bouncing around on briskly clattering trains for just under an hour, transferring a few times since leaving the Fourth Ward, and now Saionji and I were finally at our destination. We were looking for a shop on the second floor of a small building a bit of a walk from the station. A simple door stood at the base of the structure, sporting a card that read *OPEN* stuck to it. Below that was another stick-on board with words written in a trendy, pop-logo kind of font.

RULES:

COUPLES ONLY

(any gender)

"Uh...what's the deal with this, Saionji?"

"W-well, what's it look like? It means exactly what's written. This store sells some really great things, but every time I check it out, there's some kind of new wacky rule up. They change regularly, and this is the current one."

"Yeah, but still..."

"I *told* you I wanted you here because I couldn't go in by myself, and I wasn't lying. You should think of this as an honor. You get to temporarily be my...lover. Kind of."

"..."

Saying the *L* word made Saionji's ears turn red with embarrassment. I was equally flustered, too much so to reply. I suddenly felt very self-conscious. This girl, who looked just as lovely in a disguise, seemed more womanly than usual. She'd definitely bought that dress for the occasion. She looked way too adorable...

“Shinohara? Hey. Shinohara, are you listening?”

“Sorry. I spaced out for a second.”

I shook the cobwebs out. After going through the trouble to get here, we weren't about to leave empty handed.

We stood ready at the door. Kagaya waited close by in case I got into some kind of trouble, but since we weren't in 4WC mode, she wasn't listening in, which made sense. Having someone eavesdrop on me as I pretended to be someone else's boyfriend would be devastating, but more importantly, I concealed my relationship with Saionji from everyone in the Company except Himeji.

After checking my earpiece one more time, I took a breath and opened the door.

“Ohhhhh.”

I was immediately amazed. The outside made this look like some run-down, slapdash joint, but it was a completely different world inside. To put it simply, it resembled a used electronics shop—computer parts, cords, game consoles from prehistory to the modern day, mod chips, monitors, disks, cassettes. It had a little bit of everything, all in a disorganized jumble on the shelves. I played video games only occasionally, so I couldn't have explained what all of this stuff was for, but this otherworldly atmosphere was honestly something I enjoyed.

“You see? I'm glad you like it as much as I do. I'm a huge fan.”

I was so busy gawking at all the junk, it must've been obvious what I thought about it all. Saionji laughed pleasantly, then beckoned me deeper into the store. Shelves had blocked my line of sight initially, but as we moved, I spied the cash register.

“Hmm, the owner's not here. She said she'd show up today, but... Excuse me!”

“Yes, coming.”

Saionji leaned over the counter to call for help. A languid voice from the door beyond answered, and a moment after, it opened with a click, revealing a

woman in work clothes.

“Welcome... Oh, it’s you, Lily.”

Lily?

She was clearly addressing Saionji. I was thrown for a second, but it only took a second to understand. This was a fake name, a third identity she used when going out as this blond, golden-eyed girl. Dressed as she was, she couldn’t introduce herself as Sarasa Saionji or Rina Akabane.

Lily nodded back to the shopkeeper. “Yes, it’s great to see you again. I had to take this opportunity to come back.”

“That so?” replied the owner, using the towel around her neck to wipe the sweat off her brow. “Right, right, you said you’d be stopping by today. It sure has been a while.”

The two exchanged some small talk, but after that died down, the owner gave a little mischievous grin and stiffened up.

“You know, Lily, just to be sure, you’re aware of the philosophy behind this place, right? I’m running it entirely as a hobby. I only sell to the people I want to. And I decide who I like based on whether they stick to my ever-changing rules.”

“Of course. I’m pretty confident that I’m your most regular customer, in fact.”

“Maybe. At least as far as I can remember. Anyway, like the board on the door says, the current rule is couples only, and I’ve been turning away anyone who doesn’t adhere to that... Are you Lily’s boyfriend?”

A pair of curious eyes fell upon me. Sai—er, Lily’s golden eyes turned my way as well, the concern in them apparent. I was more than accustomed to this level of attention.

“I sure am,” I replied casually, meeting the owner’s gaze. “Sounds like you and Lily have known each other for a while. I’m not looking for anything. I’m just here to accompany her on the trip, so don’t worry about me.”

“How could I not worry? I don’t think you’ve ever had a guy in your life before, Lily. There was a point when I seriously wondered if you were making a

pass at *me*. Yet now you've come wearing an outfit you clearly put some effort into while showing off your boyfriend..."

"H-hold on a sec. Don't make it sound like I can't get anyone. Besides, it's your rule that made me bring my b...boyfriend. Are you trying to hurt my feelings?"

"Aw, I don't mean it like that, Lily. I'm just a masochist. Understand? I'm into the mental pain of having people demonstrate how much better they are than me in my own establishment."

"Just shut up and take it, then!"

Lily put her hands on her hips while the owner let out a cartoonish whine to indicate fake crying. Then she dropped the act, waving a hand to indicate she didn't mean it, and went back to inspecting me head to toe.

"Hmm... So this is your guy, huh?"

"Y-yeah. Hi. His name's Hiro. Pretty cool, huh?"

"..."

Lily stole occasional glances at me, sounding nervous as she spoke. I looked away, feeling a little abashed, and Lily did the same. When I listened carefully, I caught her muttering "Hiro, Hiro" under her breath, perhaps practicing to make it sound natural. The whole situation made my skin crawl.

"I seeeee..."

The owner sneered at the two of us, then raised her right hand.

"Okay, guys, how about you stop flirting for one second and look around a little?"

""?"

Lily and I turned to look over the store. Considering I had just done so a moment ago, there wasn't much new to discover, just lots of PC parts and games piled up in mountains, along with minicards that presumably contained preinstalled Abilities. Two other couples were perusing the merchandise.

"...Oh."

Lily was the first one to notice something. Unfortunately, I wasn't sure where

to look. Had the other patrons caught her attention? They didn't seem to be acting unusually. Both couples looked like teenagers, chatting as they went down the shelves. One boy grabbed an Ability instruction manual with his left hand while his girlfriend stuck close by and ran her right hand down a shelf. They were both using one hand at a time because their other hands were clasped together. You know, like lovers did.

““ ... ””

“Heh! Finally noticed, young lady?”

“Wha...what are you trying to say?”

“Look, your boyfriend Hiro is cool, the kind of wild stud that makes me want to just scream, in fact. Don't take this the wrong way, I just want to check you're not breaking the rules...are you guys really a couple?”

““Huh?””

“Japan doesn't give out licenses to prove people are lovers, not like marriage. How do I know you didn't rope in some random dude off the street?”

“Okay...but what am I supposed to say? It's your vague rule.”

“That's not the problem. Are you and Hiro dense? The two couples over there are practically glued to each other. You know, interlocking their fingers, just trying to prove they're crazy about one another. I've never done it, but I'm sure that's what it means. What I'm trying to say is, any loving relationship needs to have physical contact.”

“Th-that's completely irrational! Everyone has their own comfort zone with that kind of stuff...and so do we!”

“I get that. But there's a rule in place. If you can't even hold hands for me, how will I explain it to my other customers?”

“B-but...!”

“I'm not asking for a kiss or anything, all right?”

“A ki—?! I—I could *never* do that in public, you freak!”

The malicious grin from the owner drove Lily to glance at me, then instantly

turn red and look away. I kept it cool, but I could tell my cheeks were warming up, particularly because of Lily's overreaction. As truly embarrassing as this was for both of us, if we hesitated here and the owner decided we weren't a couple, I would be more ashamed.

"H-hey, Lily...Saionji!" I whispered.

"Ah...! What, you idiot? Are you gonna pick on me, too?"

"I'm not picking on anyone. Just holding hands is okay, isn't it? Then we can get what we need and go."

"Huh? ...Y-you mean you want to touch my body?"

"Don't phrase it that way! Look, I'm not saying we have to do the finger thing like that couple. Just hold hands like normal. You're getting flustered because you're overthinking it."

"But you're red, too. Up to your ears!"

"I know. That's why I wanna get this over with."

At the end of our hushed conversation, Lily gave me a curt, firm nod, although her eyes looked a bit teary. After shoring up her resolve, she gingerly extended her hand.

"Ngh..."

She exhaled a bit, eyes closed. Her soft fingertips reached out for my hand, and a second later, her hand was fully covering my palm. I could feel her body temperature and the beating of her heart.

"Uh, Lily...all you're doing is shaking hands."

"...?!"

My words finally forced Lily's eyes open, and she turned a darker shade of red upon realizing the problem. I'd extended my right hand, and she'd done the same. This wouldn't prove we were lovers at all. We were just a pair of weirdos who'd decided to shake hands in the middle of the store.

"N...no! Um, umm... I—I didn't mean that!"

Lily tried to defend herself, but she was too frazzled to put any words

together, so she pulled her hand back and looked down at the floor. Before I could offer an excuse...

“Ha-ha-ha! ...Great! I like it!”

““ ...Huh?””

...the owner clapped her hands and laughed, evidently enjoying every moment of this. Lily and I looked at each other, unsure what this meant.

“Boy,” the owner said, wiping a tear or two away, “you two are so innocent. I can’t believe how sheltered you are, Lily.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, you pass. The air in here’s so lovey-dovey right now, I need to open a window. That was way too much for a single woman like me...so yeah, you pass. I’ll accept that you’re lovers.”

“Y-you will?! Oh, wonderful...!”

“Um, are you sure? All we did was shake hands.”

“H-Hiro! Don’t ask that!”

“What? I don’t want her getting upset with us later.”

“Aw, don’t be like that, Mr. Boyfriend! I’d never do that. Like I said, I put up my rules so I don’t have to sell to anyone I don’t like, and I *loooove* Lily. You seem pretty nice, too, Hiro, so you pass with flying colors. Okay, what were you hoping to buy?”

““ ...””

The owner seemed tremendously satisfied with us. All Lily and I could do was glance at each other.

Lily—or Saionji—and I wound up spending around three hours in the store. More than half of that extended stay was because of the owner, but that wasn’t the only reason. I understood why Saionji liked this place so much. Watching the owner show off all the Abilities for purchase, all apparently coded by her, was a lot more fun for us than most amusement parks would’ve been.

Once our shopping there was done, we stopped at another place near the

station and checked out a bookstore, an arcade, and so on. We didn't buy anything. It was more about making the most of a day off. By the time our train approached the Fourth Ward, it was nearly night.

"...Hmm. Sounds like a lot's happened at the 4WC so far."

Saionji was seated next to me, arms crossed. She'd broached the subject of the event a little earlier, and I'd just finished recapping the provost's request, Akizuki's advances, and the rest.

"Yeah," I replied, trying to keep my voice down in this semipublic place. "For now, everything seems to be going all right, though. My focus is on escaping, and today's day four, so I've made it past the halfway point. The Company's cheats are working, and we've got some emergency defenses in place. I've got nothing to complain about...but I'm not looking forward to heading back into the thick of it tomorrow. Akizuki acting so suspiciously doesn't help, either."

"Right," Saionji whispered, brushing back a few locks of her golden-blond wig. "Noa Akizuki, the Little Devil of Eimei. She's held the number two position at your school for two years. I haven't played her in a Game yet, but if I did, I'd need a lot of prep to win. I'm not sure if she's strong or simply hard to deal with. If not for you, she'd have run away with this year's 4WC."

"You think she's that good, huh? Man, 'Little Devil' is the perfect nickname for her."

"It sure is. She acts so sickeningly sweet around everyone, and she never reveals her true self. Even worse, when she plays a Game with someone, she's not satisfied unless it's an absolute massacre of a victory."

"Really? Does she sink to underhanded stuff to do it?"

"I'm not sure, actually. I've never seen her do so, but she might be good at hiding it."

"True."

I shrugged at Saionji's logical takes, opting not to push the conversation any further. Before much longer, the train arrived at my stop.

"Hey, this is where I get off."

After we returned to School Gate Station, hours after we'd left, Saionji pointed at an exit to the right, toward her home in the Third Ward. This was where our paths split.

"Sure. Take care."

"Watch yourself during that event, okay? I'll make you pay if you lose."

Saionji made a fist and gave me a little bap on the chest while wearing a taunting smile. Then she turned around and strode off in high spirits, waving with her back to me.

"Where was that confidence earlier?" I muttered.

Recalling the handshake, I couldn't help but grin.

#

With Saionji gone, I waited behind School Gate Station for Himeji to arrive. I'd removed my disguise and returned to being Hiroto Shinohara. Himeji and I were due at the provost's office for a progress report on the Fourth Ward Challenge. Thinking it'd be strange to show up in disguise, I'd changed ahead of the meeting. It took some hair spray and a lot of combing to force my hair back to its original style. Fortunately, Kagaya was kind enough to have my uniform couriered to me.

"...Thank you for waiting, Master."

I looked up at the familiar voice and saw Himeji standing before me in her maid attire. We were headed to school now, but she must have decided there was no need for a uniform on the weekend.

"..."

She seemed to be feeling a little down. It was understandable. I had known her for just over two weeks now, and this was the first day off I hadn't spent with her. Kagaya had come along during the trip with Saionji, albeit at a distance, leaving Himeji alone in that huge mansion the whole day. I quickly made sure no one was watching, then clapped my hands together.

"I'm sorry for being gone so long, Himeji. I planned to return sooner, but..."

"Huh? Oh... No, Master, there's nothing to apologize about. We never set a

particular time to meet, so it's not an issue. I *was* jealous of you and Rina, but..."

"Jealous?"

"Never mind. I am perfectly fine, Master. Just a tiny little bit lonely, I'll admit, but nothing you need to be concerned about."

"Yeah, but..."

Himeji tried to politely dismiss this topic, but I shook my head. I appreciated her devotion to aiding me, but that didn't mean I could treat her poorly.

"Whether you're all right with it or not, I still feel bad about this. You do so much for me. That's why..."

"...?"

"I have a...present, I guess. A souvenir."

I reached into an inner pocket of my uniform (I'd made sure to slip the gift in while changing) and took out a light-blue envelope, one smaller than the sort used in thank-you notes. Himeji held out her hand and accepted it from me.

"What...is this?"

"Well, after Saionji finished shopping at this one place, I thought I'd pick up something for you as well. It's an Ability crafted by the store owner."

"..."

"I know this isn't the most traditional thing to give to a girl...but I haven't done anything like this before, so I wasn't really sure what to go with. I figured you'd appreciate something useful."

"This is your first time?"

"As far as I remember. Why do you ask?"

"It's nothing... Just wondering."

The suddenly taciturn Himeji looked down at the blue envelope one more time. She brought her other hand to it gently. "Can I open it?" Once she received my approval, she politely unfolded the envelope. The card inside was kept in a stylish carrying case.

“So this is how custom ones are sold. It looks like any other. A device can read the chip on the bottom right to install the Ability,” Himeji remarked.

“Yeah. The owner pretty much pressed this on me, saying it was her top recommendation. What’s it say on the back?”

“The back? Um... Here it is. ‘Ability name: Pinch Hitter. Effect: Ability is available when not engaged in a Game. Allows user to switch with a player in a Game and compete in their place. Requires the permission of the player being switched out.’”

“So what’s that mean?”

“In essence, Master, it allows the person with the Ability to take over for another in a Game. This is actually quite impressive. We have a few Ability experts in the Company, but I’ve never seen anyone else create one that can interfere with a Game this way, and it’s legal, too. I can see why the store owner recommended it.”

“Wow, really? Are you sure it’s really that useful? Swapping in as you pleased would be overpowered, since you need the other person’s permission. I’m not sure how useful that will be.”

“W-well, I don’t think it’s useless at all. Although, it will only work in a few scenarios. It’s not exactly the most general purpose of Abilities, sad to say. A great pity.”

Himeji must have picked up on my disappointment and decided to tease me a little. She held the case close to her chest.

“Regardless, this is the first gift my master has ever given to me. Thank you very much, Master. I’ll cherish this my whole life.”

A charming smile spread across her face.

b

“Sunday, April 23, 6:37:52 p.m.

“Coordinates confirmed for target Hiroto Shinohara.

“Devices detected within one-hundred-yard range: nine hundred and twenty-three.

“Number of 4WC survivors among them: two hundred and fifty-two.

“Prerequisite conditions satisfied. All other designations are confirmed completed.

“Execution command confirmed. Continuing execution of program after preset count.

“Three seconds...two...one...

“...activate.”

#

“Hmm...?”

I was about five minutes into my walk with Himeji in her maid outfit from the station to Eimei’s main entrance. It was well past hours for the 4WC, so we didn’t hesitate to enter school grounds. However, the moment we did, Himeji stopped, a look of concern on her face.

“What is it, Himeji?”

“Um... I’m sorry. Give me one moment to check on things.”

Without further clarification, she put her head down, pressed a finger to her earpiece, and began whispering. She had to be talking with Kagaya, and by the looks of it, they were having a pretty serious conversation. After about a minute, Himeji put her finger down, looking distressed.

“Bad news, Master. I just received word from Kagaya that multiple Eimei students—people still in the 4WC competition—are rushing here in a large group. There are over two hundred of them.”

“T-two...?! Why?!”

“Well, Master...apparently your current location has been spread across STOC, the school forums, and LNN’s emergency notification system.”

“Huh?!?”

I was too shocked by this unexpected development to respond. Someone was spreading my whereabouts online? That made no sense. I had no idea how that worked or why.

“But it’s past six in the evening... The Trial cutoff was over an hour ago. What do they get out of charging over now?”

“I know...but there must be *something* going on. The terms *4WC* and *bug* are trending on STOC. Supposedly, the time limit on sending requests has been temporarily lifted... I don’t know how trustworthy that claim is, but videos are being posted from Eimei School premises.”

“So they *can* challenge me?” I frowned at Himeji. If that was the case, this was obviously a malicious attack on me. Someone was trying to take me down, and I thought of one suspect immediately.

“Noa Akizuki... Did she do this? Could she manage this much?”

“I don’t know...but there’s no time to think. We need to get out of here as soon as possible, Master!”

“Right.”

I couldn’t help but fall into a panic at times like these, but Himeji was right. We needed to escape before anyone challenged me. Today was supposed to be a precious break from all that, so both Basic Jamming and Body Swap were down for maintenance. I’d have to do all the fighting by myself.

I do still have an emergency defense, but I’d hate to waste it on something like this. Damn!

I bit my lower lip in frustration while scanning my surroundings. We were standing in the concourse just beyond the main entrance. The most obvious way out was to return the way we came. However, the bulk of the two hundred students were bound to come streaming in that way. Our only real option was to move deeper in. The club activities building and athletic fields were off-limits because other students might be there. Our choices were slim.

I took a breath and looked into Himeji’s blue eyes.

“We should head for the main school building, Himeji. Let’s hide and try to wait this out.”

“All right,” she agreed. The main building was undoubtedly locked on a Sunday, but I had the Company backing me up. If its members could find a first-

floor classroom window or something and open it, Himeji and I could be inside within a few minutes.

With that in mind, we took our usual back route to the building.

“Ah...!”

“...”

The moment we turned the corner, I ran right into someone, lost my balance, and fell forward. Actually, it would be better to say I was tripped. Someone swept my leg, killing my moment. It was an absolute takedown. I felt a dull pain in my arms, legs, and stomach...but that didn't matter. I lifted my head to see the person who'd knocked me over and all but pinned me to the ground.

“...Hee-hee!”

The girl with twin ponytails had become a familiar sight recently.

“Wow, Hiroto, I bumped into you again! ♪ Maybe that means we're secretly super compatible or something?”

“Akizuki...!”

“Mmm? What is it? Why are you looking all scary? Come on, you pushed me over. Hee-hee-hee! That's not too nice, is it? I understand why you'd want to lunge at someone as cute as me, but nobody likes a man who's *too* pushy! ♡”

“What are you talking about? Let me go!”

“Aw, what are *you* talking about, Hiroto? You've got me all wrong. You can't move because you virtually landed right on top of me.”

She made it sound like I'd shoved her and dropped onto her after, but her hands were behind my back, and her legs were wrapped around mine. I was locked up. A soft sensation ran across my whole body. It almost made me faint, but I couldn't. This was Akizuki's doing. I couldn't fall for her ploy.

“Hee-hee! There's no escape, Hiroto... ♡”

“...!”

Akizuki's sweet voice tickled my eardrums at point-blank range. And she was right. We were completely visible from the main entrance. With all the

commotion we were making, it was just a matter of time until the mob came around.

“Master...!”

Himeji tried to pull me free. The panic showed plainly in her voice, which was rare for her. I appreciated her help, of course, but if brute force was all she could manage, even while connected with Kagaya, it meant there were no better options. Akizuki’s trap was perfect. Not even the Company could thwart her now.

Well, so be it...

There was only one logical conclusion.

“Request a Trial, Himeji!”

“Understood!” she answered immediately.

Having Himeji challenge me to a Trial was my one-time-only escape in this event. As long as I was “In Combat” with someone, I couldn’t receive other challenges. We had a twenty-four-hour window to settle our match, and at the end of the time limit, Himeji could press the “Give Up” button on her device before we were both eliminated because of the penalty.

This will make me invincible for a day, but... I really wish it hadn’t come to this.

While I stewed over this, Himeji pointed her device at me and sent the Trial request.

Akizuki saw this and slowly released her grip on me, unraveling herself from underneath. Once she was back on her feet, she stretched with little regard for her rumpled uniform. She gave us a skewed grin.

“Awwww, too bad... ♡ A few moments later and the whole Academy would’ve been buzzing about Noa and Hiroto’s secret love affair. Still, I accomplished my main goal, so that’s good enough. Hee-hee! See you later, Hiroto! ♪”

“Wait, Akizuki! What’re you after? Are you working with some outside element?”

“Huhhh?” The girl was very calm despite her failed attack. “What are you talking about? I’m sorry, I’m too cute to understand difficult questions! ♡”

Akizuki turned and sauntered off. The moment she was out of sight, I felt horribly fatigued. That was a close call. The shock and panic had me feeling like I was losing my mind. Without that emergency escape prepared, I would've been in serious trouble.

"A-are you all right, Master...?"

I was on one knee and panting. Himeji crouched in front of me with a worried expression. She brought a hand to my head, wiping the sweat away.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help much. I am an incompetent maid, and I deserve to be scolded."

"Don't talk like that, Himeji. I would've lost a long time ago if not for you. Plus, you were talking with Kagaya that whole time to get help, right?"

Akizuki's schemes might have thrown us, yet despite all the time she'd wasted, that crowd of opponents never arrived. That was clearly thanks to the Company. It must have planted a bunch of fake coordinates around. Putting that together so quickly was truly a work of genius.

"Thank you very much, Master."

Himeji smiled, evidently relieved by the sincerity in my voice. She touched her hand to her earpiece again. "The time-schedule bug has apparently been fixed. Given her conspicuous appearance, I think we can safely conclude Ms. Akizuki is involved."

"Yeah. She's a tricky one..."

I pictured that mischievous smile. How had she known I was headed for school on a Sunday? She'd mentioned before she left that she'd accomplished her main goal. If her objective wasn't to knock me out, then what was she after?

"..."

Whatever her reasons, I'd managed to survive. 4WC's fourth day was over. More than half of the contest was behind me. There was plenty of work ahead, though. Himeji and I still needed to meet with the provost to talk about Akizuki, and we had to review future tactics with the Company.

#

We delivered our report to Provost Ichinose without incident. It dragged a bit because she kept derailing the topic to banter with us, but it's not like we had that much to talk about. Boiled down, her reactions to the main points were as follows:

"Hmm. So Noa Akizuki's a primary suspect after all..."

"Oh, no, I didn't predict she would be involved. It's just that there aren't many out there with the tools to steal a Unique Star from Eimei's server. When you consider rank, talent, and motive, the number of candidates drops considerably."

"The green star... Our records make it clear that it provides some kind of detection function, but the extent of its power can vary widely depending on who holds it. In the hands of someone of Akizuki's talents, I honestly can't say what might happen."

"Yeah, I've been looking into it, but the mastermind remains a mystery. The Fifth, Eighth, Twelfth, and Fifteenth Wards are the most likely. They've always had it out for the Fourth Ward. In particular, the head of the Twelfth Ward would be the absolute worst to fight. We've tangled a few times, but I still haven't uncovered what he's truly like."

"That's true. Participants are dropping from the 4WC quicker than usual. There's this rumor circulating online that Eimei School will give out special rewards based on your number of wins. It's completely false, but it's stoked a lot of aggressive behavior. Dealing with it has been such a pain. Who do you think has to clean all this up afterward?"

"Obviously, competitors dwindle toward the end of the event. Still, I'd say it's roughly thirty percent more intense this year. There's a good chance Noa Akizuki is involved in some way, too. Our first job is to catch her. That might open a path to our mastermind, too."

"Heh-heh... I'll be counting on you, my little fake Seven Star."

It was dark by the time we walked home from the provost's office.

"...Oh," Himeji said just as our mansion came into sight.

“Mm? What is it?”

“N-no, um... There’s actually something I wanted to buy while I was out, but I forgot until now.”

I nodded. “That makes sense. We’ve been running all over the place today...”

Honestly, Akizuki’s attack had left my head feeling pretty empty. I couldn’t blame Himeji for blanking on an errand or two.

“Can it wait until tomorrow?”

“That’s a very tempting idea, Master...but I hoped to fry something for dinner tonight, you see. I have some very high-quality shrimp and oysters that I procured via the Saionji family, and fried seafood happens to be a specialty of mine. Kagaya keeps going on about how my crispy batter makes her want to melt in her chair.”

“Oh. That sounds pretty good.”

“But there’s no sauce.”

“No...?!”

“Do you understand, Master? This is actually a very difficult problem. I know you and I prefer brown *chuno* sauce to tartar, and I’m far too settled on this idea to cook something else tonight. I’d feel too defeated otherwise.”

Himeji made herself sound a bit like a perfectionist, but I understood her point. My stomach craved fried seafood now, too. If that was to be tonight’s meal, sauce was a necessity.

“And so,” she said with a light bow, “I’m going to stop by the convenience store. You can go home, Master.”

“Nah, you head back. I can pick it up for you.”

“I’m afraid I have to refuse. There aren’t many people out, but you are still a Seven Star, and I am your maid. We need to maintain that status quo in public. Heh-heh. It wouldn’t do for a maid to send her master out on errands, would it? People would be quite angry with me.”

“All right... If you say so...”

I couldn't refuse her when she put it that way. It still didn't make a lot of sense to me, but if she'd made up her mind, I wouldn't try to change it.

So I returned to my dorm alone and got to work gathering the latest info on Akizuki and the Fourth Ward Challenge. Before I knew it, an hour and a half had passed.

"...Something's wrong," I muttered, eyeing the living room clock. I took a sip of my lukewarm tea. I'd brewed it myself, so it wasn't very good.

Something was amiss. No convenience store trip took this long. It was a five-minute walk at most. Himeji was the serious-minded sort. She definitely would have contacted me if something had gone awry.

"Better call her..."

However, before I even had the chance, my device began vibrating. This wasn't an LNN or STOC message, but an incoming call. Himeji's name was displayed on the screen.

"Hello?" I said with a bit of relief.

"Hee-hee... Hi there, Hiroto! Good evening! ♪"

"...?!"

The sweet voice on the other end made me freeze in place. Noa Akizuki, the Little Devil Six Star who'd been disturbingly hounding me since the start of the 4WC, was on the other end. Why was she using Himeji's device to contact me?

"What do you want?"

"Huh? What do I want? I just happened to run into your maid is all! I asked her for a little favor, and she was kind enough to let me borrow this for a bit. Hee-hee-hee! I guess it's because I'm so cute."

"What the hell did you do to Himeji? She better be all right."

"Wow, what's your deal, huh? You really go off on the most random stuff, Hiroto." She sighed. "Since you need to know so badly, I'll pass this over to her real quick. I know she's your precious maid and all! ♡"

Blessed silence returned. Then, a few seconds later, I heard some hesitant-

sounding breaths over the line.

“...Himeji?” I asked hesitantly.

“*Um, hello, Master,*” came the monotonous response. Himeji always kept her tone pretty controlled, never showing major mood swings. However, she could emote when she wished to, enough that I could sense her feelings. Yet the person on the other end might as well have been a robot. It nearly sounded as though she were holding something back.

“*I’m very sorry, Master.*”

“...”

“*I can’t give you all of the details...but I actually have two things I need to apologize for. First...I’m afraid I likely won’t be able to return home tonight. I can’t be with you right now, Master.*”

“You can’t come back? Did Akizuki do something to you?”

“*...I’m sorry. I can’t tell you.*”

Her voice dropped to a whisper. I had no intention of criticizing her right now, but the unease and confusion were welling in my mind.

“*Second... You and I are ‘In Combat’ right now, Master. We’re safe from other Trial requests for twenty-four hours, but we need to end it before the time limit or we’ll both be eliminated.*”

“Yeah...”

“*Well, about that...*”

A pause. It must have been hard to find the right words, but then I heard her exhale, perhaps to steel her resolve.

“*I’m afraid,*” she said, her voice more resigned now, “*I will no longer be able to forfeit our Trial tomorrow.*”

“...!”

“*I deeply apologize about this, Master. You may punish me any way you like afterward. I will heed any order you give me, and I will accept any of the anger or hatred you throw my way. So please...don’t aim to win tomorrow’s Trial.*”

“_____”

I stood there, dumbfounded at her pleading. But before I could sufficiently recover to reply, a far bouncier voice came through my device.

“Hee-hee-hee! ♪ Well? Did your maid get the message across?”

“You...”

“Oh, quit being so dramatic! Everything’s all right! I haven’t done anything to her yet, I promise! Of course, whether I do depends on your response... Heh-heh! ♪ I’ll catch you tomorrow! ♡”

A merciless *click*, and Akizuki had cut the connection. I immediately called back, more on reflex than from conscious choice, but I only got an endless ringing. The other side had nothing left to talk about.

“Damn it!”

My emotions got the best of me, and I threw my device down on the table. She got me. She totally got me. This was probably what Akizuki had wanted from the start. Looking back, from the moment she’d contacted me on the first day of the 4WC, she’d been scoping out Himeji and me, judging Himeji’s position in my life. Then, after that earlier attack that I’d thought was a failure, Akizuki acted like nothing was wrong.

Now it made sense. Her tripping me had been to force me to use my emergency defense. She hadn’t intended to beat me there. After watching me, Akizuki had concluded that a desperate situation would force me to enter a Trial with Himeji to keep safe for a day. And once I did, Akizuki had made off with Himeji.

She was forcing Himeji to keep the Trial going with some yet-unknown threat. There was no choice but to compete against Himeji and win. Akizuki realized that Himeji was the weakest link in my defense, and she’d struck at it in the most effective way possible. It was a little frightening how accurately she read me. A perfect, flawless strategy.

“But...”

Honestly, it was tough to accept the reality of the situation. I tried to calm my

rapid breathing. Things were certainly stacked in Akizuki's favor, but I wasn't defeated yet. In a way, this was kind of a big chance. Akizuki making a move now after lurking under the radar for so long meant this was her ultimate plan. Unlike in the previous incident, she was genuinely gunning for me now. If I conquered the upcoming Trial, I might be able to stop her assault. Perhaps I could turn the tables on the Little Devil and escape this apparent dead end...

"...No. That's wrong."

The words came out half-unconsciously. Realizing what I'd said, I donned an exaggerated smile, flipping a mental switch.

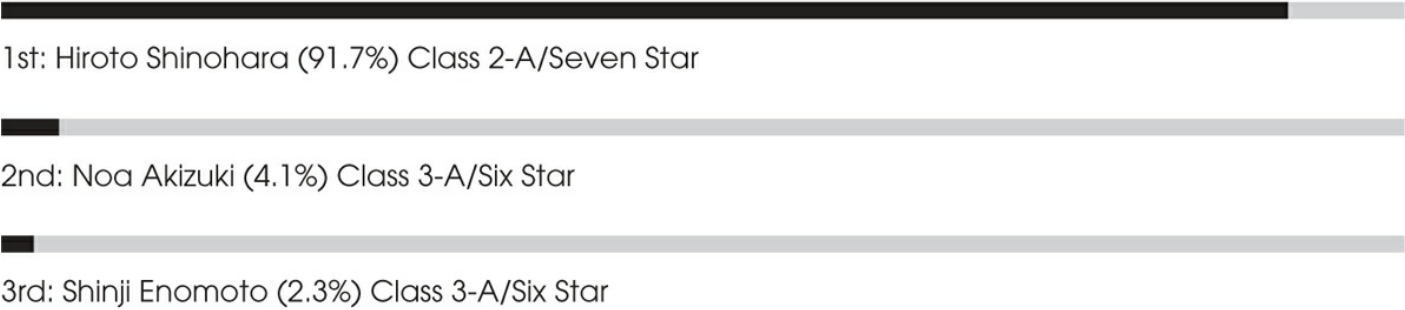
"There's no maybe about it. I'm not going to lose. No matter what."

Fourth Ward Challenge: End of Day 4

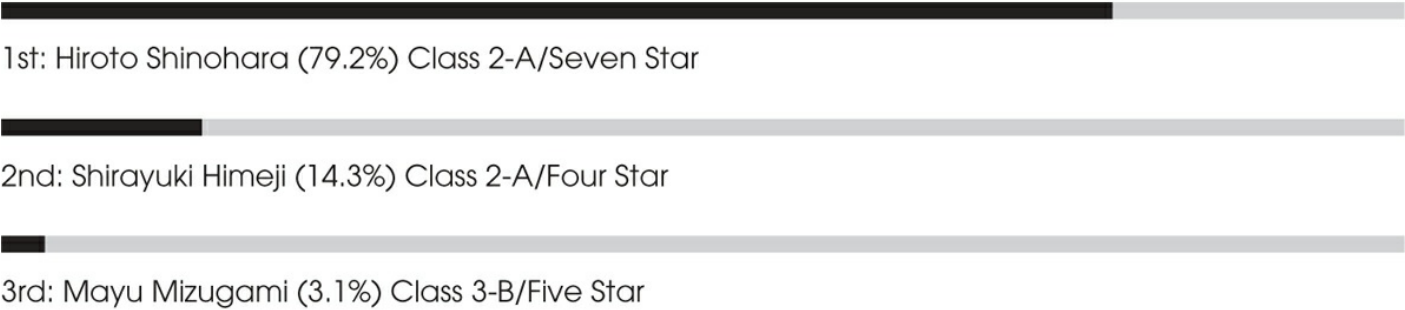
Knocked out (Saturday/Sunday): 1,228 Survivors: 1,916

Fourth Ward Challenge Pregame Survey

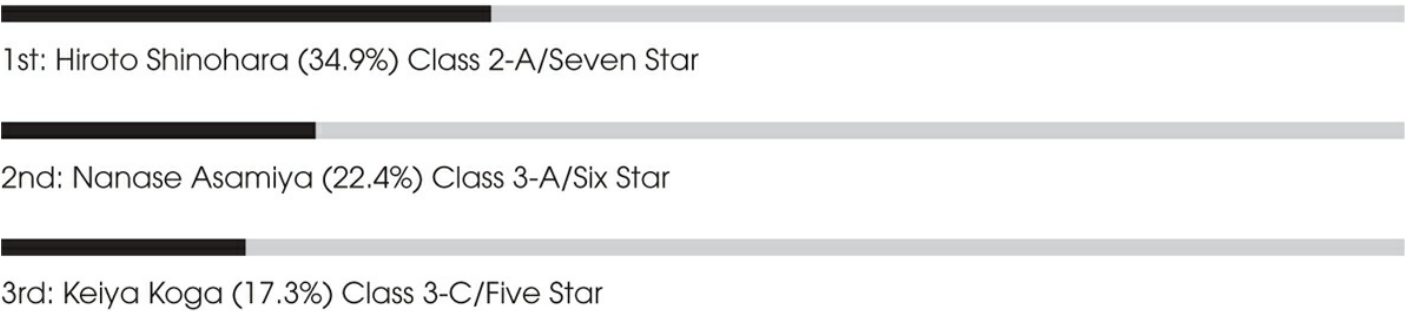
① Who do you think will win the upcoming Fourth Ward Challenge?



② Whom do you want to play against the most in the 4WC?



③ Who do you think will be the most aggressive (win the most battles) in the 4WC?



LNN Reporter’s Comment

It’s finally 4WC season again! And just as everyone expected, Hiroto Shinohara makes a clean sweep of our annual pre-event survey! What will this maverick transfer do in Eimei School’s week-long battle event? You’ll have to watch until the very last Trial is over. Make sure you bring some eyedrops so you don’t miss a moment! (Author: SK)

Chapter 3

The Little Devil's Scheme

#

"Hahhh..."

My deep sigh echoed through the mansion late Sunday night. The girl slumped on the table across from me flashed an exhausted look as she propped her head up with one hand.

"Sheesh... This is a real mess."

Sarasa Saionji, the (fake) little rich girl, responded to my SOS immediately. She had been all prim and proper (and blond) when I had last seen her a few hours ago. She'd since abandoned that disguise for her usual hoodie one.

"You know," she said after a long exhalation. Her eyes watched me from beneath the hood. "I was just about to have a nice bath. Thanks to you, my evening plans are all messed up."

"Yeah, um, I'm really sorry about that... You got here pretty quick, though."

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, if one of my friends is—wait, no! Um, umm... Yuki. I'm doing it for Yuki's sake. You told me Yuki's missing, I got worried, and now I'm here. I'm not doing it for you or anything."

"Either way's fine, really..."

I shook my head, lacking the mental energy to deal with Saionji's typical routine. Despite psyching myself up earlier, I was clearly in a bad spot. Himeji, who'd been constantly at my side, was gone, and I was pretty mentally exhausted.

"Mmm..."

Saionji pouted a bit, evidently irked that I wasn't playing along. She sighed.

"This really has you rattled, huh? Okay, tell me everything. We won't get

anywhere otherwise.”

“Um...are you sure?”

“Whether I am or not, you called me over because you wanted my help, didn’t you? Or did you just want to cry and have me tell you everything will be okay?”

“N-no... Thanks, Saionji.”

Saionji’s blunt tone helped straighten me out, and I lifted my head.

“Y-you don’t need to thank me,” she said, a tad abashed. Maybe that speech had just been meant to cheer me up. Despite how prickly Saionji could be, she was oddly empathetic when necessary.

“...*Ahem.*” I needed to be considerate in turn, so I coughed to change the subject.

“I already told you that Himeji’s gone, so let me explain why. Simply put, Akizuki kidnapped her.”

“...What?”

“Noa Akizuki...the Little Devil of Eimei. She took Himeji. Before that, Himeji sent me a Trial as a last-ditch effort to protect me from incoming challenges. We intended to have her forfeit that Trial at the last moment, but she won’t be able to do that anymore.”

“Huh?! W-wait, that’s a serious problem, isn’t it?!”

Saionji put both hands on the table and leaned forward, bringing her face dangerously close to mine. My nose caught a sweet aroma.

“How did it come to that?”

“W-well...it’s kind of a long story...”

Saionji was understandably confused, so I gave her the full rundown. Saionji already knew about the provost’s request and Akizuki’s weird behavior, so all I really had to tell her about was the recent attack and subsequent phone call.

“...Hmm. All right.” Once I was done, Saionji nodded with her right hand over her mouth. “So the Little Devil was the mastermind all along?”

“In all probability. However, there’s still no evidence. We’re smack-dab in the middle of the 4WC, so her trying to defeat me isn’t exactly bizarre. And she’s far from the only one who’s after me. Unless I know for certain she’s working with some outside element, I can’t do very much. She’s good at deflecting accusations. She speaks at this very practiced pace, always ensuring she never shows anything genuine about herself.”

“Well, that’s how a Six Star is. I’m sure she’s well versed in tactical deception.” Saionji sighed. I’m sure she’d grown quite experienced with people like Akizuki as the Empress. She raised her hood a bit and fixed me in her ruby eyes.

“Basically, this is a big crisis *and* a big chance for you. You’re standing on a cliff right now. If you can find a way through this, you might be able to pull ahead of Akizuki.”

“Right. No doubt about that... But there’s one major problem I need to deal with if I want any chance at beating Himeji in this Trial.”

“A problem? What kind of problem?”

“It’s pretty obvious if you think about it. I can’t rely on Himeji’s support this time.”

“...Oh.”

It only took a moment for Saionji to comprehend. Himeji was my opponent, so I couldn’t expect her help. If she employed cheats, it wouldn’t be to help me. Plus, it was likely too dangerous to reach out to any other members of the Company. Himeji, their leader, was in Akizuki’s clutches. Any conversations with the Company might be overheard.

Saionji leaned toward me again in obvious concern. “S-so what’re we gonna do? I want to help, but cheating isn’t really part of my skill set!”

“Yeah...”

I passed myself off as a Seven Star using a mix of lying and cheating. Saionji, meanwhile, was a true genius who’d clawed her way up to Seven Star with nothing but sheer talent. And while her intelligence was a definite asset, it took more than that to win a challenge on the Academy. The winning move might be obvious, but without a high-enough rank to access the necessary Ability, it was

hopeless. That's why I had to cheat.

"" ... ""

Saionji and I fell silent, thinking for a while, but we couldn't produce anything useful.

"You know, Saionji," I said, shaking my head a little, "I know I'm in no position to say this, but why don't we think about that stuff later? Maybe I'll figure out a way to win by myself. We can look at what kind of Trial it is first—"

"Hey, heyyy..."

"" ...?! ""

We both jumped in our seats as we heard the living room door click open and a cheerful voice called to us. After confirming that Saionji had pulled her hood back over her head, I looked over my shoulder.

"...Kagaya?"

The somewhat disheveled slacker girl had arrived. She had a decent outfit on today—business casual, I guess. However, it looked like she'd been out drinking somewhere. Her blouse was unbuttoned around her chest, and her eyes looked sunken. There was a mature sexiness to her.

"Yeah, it's me, Kagaya... I'm pretty sure it is, anyway..."

She half walked, half wandered up to me, dropped her bag on the ground, and threw herself on the sofa.

"*Phewww*, okay, good night... Oh, wait, Hiro, why're you at my place? Lookin' for some funnn??"

"No. Are you drunk?"

"Sure am! You had me wait on standby while you went on that flirty date with a mystery beauty for hours. I got soooo jealous. How was I s'posed to deal with that sober, huh?"

"Um...sorry, I guess?"

I turned my gaze away from her as she threw off her stockings (maybe they were too tight for her?). Someone as pretty as Kagaya could easily find a lover,

but she didn't bother to dress nicely, she had nearly zero life skills, and her work at the Company was...

"Wait a minute. Um, Kagaya, did someone order you to come here? Maybe someone with twin ponytails?"

"Twin what? Nahhhh, why would she ever do that? I was drinking that whole time myself... Drinking... Oh, wait...this isn't my home."

Her mind must've cleared up a little, because now Kagaya blinked as she looked at me. She must have been so drunk that she'd come here instead of her own place. And that meant I had the Company's leading electronics and programming expert safe in my dorm.

"Well...good timing, at least," I muttered.

"Hwuh?" Kagaya responded, tilting her head a bit as she sprawled out on my couch.

"Sh-Sh-Shirayuki is *gone*?!!?!?!?"

Approximately twenty minutes later, following a barrage of cold water, ice, sports drinks, fruit, massages, and every other surefire cure we could think of, I finally managed to explain matters to Kagaya. All her sluggishness immediately vanished, and her eyes went wide.

"Yeah." I nodded. "She's gone. I think you remember Akizuki's attack at the schoo—"

"Wh-why?! Why did you force yourself on her like that?! No matter how cute and erotic Shirayuki's body is... You gotta walk before you can run, you know! How could you?!"

"She didn't run to Akizuki because I got pervy on her!"

Kagaya had me by the collar, shaking me around while saying horrible things about me. I explained what had happened as quickly as I could, and she responded with an "Oh my God..." before slumping into a chair. Only then did she realize there was someone else in the room, I guess. She blinked at the figure in the hoodie, raising an eyebrow.

"Um...are you a home invader?"

“No!”

I suppose I couldn't blame Kagaya for her reaction. Saionji had the zipper on her hoodie pulled up to her mouth, and the hood came as low as her nose. It certainly made her look ready for some criminal activity. I'd had the same sort of reaction when I first saw her, too.

Regardless, Saionji the home invader shook her head vigorously. “Look, I...I'm just a poor student from another ward who was called over to this guy's place. And I'd appreciate you not prying further than that, okay?”

“Hiro called you over? Ohhhh... So I guess we're pals, then, Hoodie Girl.”

“I-in a way, maybe. Are you going to address me as ‘Hoodie Girl’ now? That beats ‘home invader,’ but I really wish you'd, um...”

“What? I know nothing about you apart from your clothes. Take it off if you don't like it.”

“Ugh... Okay, fine, address me however you want.”

Saionji raised her hands, grudgingly keeping herself hidden. Kagaya, seemingly satisfied with this, turned back toward me.

Honestly, her staggering into my place was a godsend. Here was Kagaya, the Company's leading IT expert and a girl who could add all sorts of cheats to my device. I had her in the same room with Saionji, a genius capable of devising a strategy to survive this. They ought to be a great pair—the perfect one to face Akizuki.

So I decided to make it official.

“All right... I'd like to kick off a strategy meeting so we can get Himeji back.”

#

“Okay, guys! The first order of business is explaining the rules! Woo-hoo!”

A few minutes and a change of seating later, we plunged into our tactics conference. We stayed here in the living room instead of moving to the home theater. Saionji sat next to me while Kagaya occupied a chair across from us. We could check the rules on my device, of course, but it was more convenient for us to view them all at once.

After clearing her throat to act authoritative, Kagaya got started. “The name of Shirayuki’s Trial is ‘Clash of Triangles.’ Basically, it’s a card game featuring a unique deck. Each player receives a hand with ten cards, and they both play one at the same time each turn. Each card is stronger or weaker than certain others. Win, and you add your opponent’s card to your capture pile, and vice versa. This repeats until your hands are empty. Whoever takes the most cards by the end wins.”

“Hmm, I see... Sounds pretty easy to follow.”

“Right? You want to capture as many cards as possible. There are two hands of ten cards, plus a bonus card placed in the pot to start. Those are the only cards available during the Trial. You’re after a majority. The moment you have eleven cards in your capture pile, you win. Of course, we gotta consider Abilities, too, so it’s not that straightforward.”

After breezing through that, Kagaya showed all the info she had so far on her PC screen—not just text, but weirdly well-animated video, too. She made it seem like a walk in the park, yet she’d only learned the rules of Clash of Triangles a few minutes ago. She was producing these videos on the fly using her tablet behind the PC. It was mind blowing.

“...”

I wasn’t about to praise her talents, though. I guess I didn’t want to admit it.

“So, um...what are the cards? And how do they stack up against each other?”

“Hee-hee-hee...! I’m so glad you asked, Hiro! I just finished a slide that goes over all of that... Here it is!”

With an awe-inspiringly smug look on her face, Kagaya jammed a finger on the Enter key. The computer display shifted to a large diagram.

Clash of Triangles: Card Relationships

This Game uses six different types of cards—the king, the prince, the queen, the knight, the assassin, and the peasant. For ease in explaining the rules, the king, prince, and queen will be referred to collectively as “royalty.”

Matchup 1: Royalty beats knight, knight beats assassin, assassin beats royalty.

Matchup 2: Royalty and knight both beat peasant. Assassin ties with peasant. All cards tie with a twin of themselves.

Matchup 3: King beats prince, prince beats queen, and queen beats king.

“Hmm...”

While viewing the chart Kagaya had created for us, I began thinking quietly. I'd wondered why the word *triangle* was used when there were six types of cards. Now I understood that the Game was designed around a pair of triangles. The first was royalty, knight, and assassin, and the second was king, prince, and queen. Basically, it was a more complex version of rock-paper-scissors.

The role of the peasant cards also stuck out as odd. The peasant couldn't beat anything. That made them sound like bad cards to have.

“...Aren't the peasants kind of weak? It seems like a detriment to have one.”

“Mmm, kind of,” Kagaya replied. “You have a point, but the peasant cards have special effects that none of the others do. That's why they don't do much otherwise. Lemme go through all the other rules first, okay? You'll learn the secret behind the peasants in just a sec!”

She tapped away at her laptop again, moving to a different slide. This one had illustrations of all the cards, divided into two even rows of ten as follows:

Set A: King – Queen – Prince – Knight x2 – Assassin x2 – Peasant x3

Set B: King – Queen – Prince – Knight x1 – Assassin x1 – Peasant x5

There was no other text on the slide, but I understood.

“Are these the two players' hands?”

“Bingo! You got it, Hiro! In fact, these are the exact hands that will be dealt at the start. Which you will receive is random.”

“Wow... One sure seems stronger than the other.”

“Right? The second loses a knight and assassin in exchange for more peasants, those seemingly useless cards, so the first's a lot more powerful. If you wind up with the second, you'll be at a big disadvantage.”

“...I see,” I said, organizing my thoughts as I gazed at the twenty cards. “But

regardless of which hand I'm given, I'll start the Trial with one of them, and I'll have to choose a card to play while guessing what my opponent will throw out. By the way, how's the Game itself work? You said I could capture cards or lose them based on their strength. If I played a queen and Himeji played a knight, would I capture the knight from her?"

"A lot more than that, actually. You'd win everything on the table!"

"The pot, you mean?"

"Yeah! Let me explain. In Clash of Triangles, two things can happen after each side plays a card. First, if it's a tie, the cards are placed in the pot."

"Okay."

"Then there's the other case, if one card's stronger than the other. When that happens, the winning player captures all cards on the board, not just the ones you and your opponent played. The whole pot! They're all added to the winner's capture pile, and like I said, whoever captures eleven cards first wins."

"Oh... All right. So that's how it works."

I nodded a few times. It was like how the lottery carried over the big prize if nobody won. Continual ties would add more to the pot. And it would all go to whoever won a round. You could potentially capture four or eight cards in a single play.

"Yup." Kagaya appeared satisfied that I was keeping up. "As for the other rules... Well, I should mention this one first. Clash of Triangles immediately ends when the players use the final cards in their hands...but if one player somehow has at least one card left when their opponent runs out, they'll capture all the cards left in the pot. Of course, that can't happen under the standard rules, so that'll come into play only if an Ability affects the hands. I think that's about it!"

Kagaya wrapped up her rundown, and I looked over the rules one last time. I didn't see anything else I wanted to ask about.

"Okay, let's go over the effects of the peasant cards. Then we can figure out how to conquer this Trial. Hmm?"

Just as I attempted to move on with this meeting, my device vibrated on the

table, interrupting me. I thought about ignoring it but reached for it anyway, fearing the worst.

“...What’s this?”

“Something wrong, Shinohara?” Saionji asked, on high alert.

“Um...”

I shook my head at her and projected the message I’d received in the air. It contained a short passage and the names of two nasty-sounding Abilities—Change Probability level 4 and Force Control.

“It’s from Himeji,” I stated, brow furrowed in doubt and confusion. “To be exact, it was sent from her device. ‘Here’s the list of Abilities I will be using in Clash of Triangles.’”

Saionji narrowed her eyes. “So...Yuki’s revealing her strategy to us? Why?”

“I don’t know. I doubt this was sent without Akizuki’s knowledge. Himeji didn’t type those Ability names in. She sent me a log from her settings screen. It’s probably genuine.”

“Yeah, I don’t think Yuki or the Little Devil would try a cheap trick like that. It’s safe to believe this message...but I can’t say I get the motive behind it. Maybe it’s just to prove she’s better than us? Akizuki knows she has the advantage, so this could be an attempt to get under your skin.”

“Hmm... I could see Akizuki doing that, yeah.”

However, it was just as likely to be some other tactic. Regardless, we knew the abilities Himeji would use.

“Mmm.” Saionji nodded next to me, arms crossed. “Akizuki’s taken a pretty simple approach. Change Probability is a higher-level version of Luck. Yuki will be able to mess with any probability-driven variables that may appear in a Trial. At level four, she can turn a fifty percent chance into a sure thing. I think Yuki’s first move will be to alter the random hand selection to ensure she gets the better set. That means you’re guaranteed the weaker one, Shinohara.”

“Ahhh... Yeah, looks like you’re right. So what about Force Control? Because I sure don’t like the sound of it.”

“You shouldn’t. Force Control is exclusive to higher ranks. It allows the user to dictate decisions from their opponent. It’s only useful in Games with commands and doesn’t last for many turns, but it’s real trouble for us.”

“Dictate decisions?”

I was speechless. It was even more devious than I’d thought. If I had that used on me, I’d be crushed no matter my strategy.

“If she uses it in this Trial, how long will the effect last?”

“Exactly three turns. She’ll probably trigger it at the start, when it’ll be most effective. Then she’ll take all your best cards and build up a huge advantage in her capture pile. Only after that would you finally get to start. That’s what she wants, I think.”

“Man, what a nightmare...”

“I know,” Saionji replied while watching the projection. “It’s clear Yuki’s playing to win.”

Kagaya, who was busying herself typing information on Himeji’s Abilities or something into her tablet, took the news with an easy smile. “Yeah,” she said, returning her attention to us. “Shirayuki’s pretty serious about this. Nothing’s off the table...but that doesn’t mean we’re totally helpless.”

“How so?”

“Heh! Come on, Hiro! I can’t have you downplaying the powers of the Company, the world’s greatest secret organization! If we can’t win the normal way, we’ll just cheat or do whatever else we need to! That’s our take on justice! I, Kagaya, am loved by all electrons of the world! If I can hack into the Trial system from outside the school, and Shirayuki breaks the security from the inside...”

“...”

“...Oh, right, we don’t have our fearless leader!”

Kagaya deflated so quickly that it was jarring. Despite all her technical skills, she was the type who couldn’t achieve much without the right person in charge.

“Well, we’re screwed, then... The Company’s finished...”

“Could you please not surrender for me?”

“Sorry, but not having Shirayuki makes a lot of things difficult, you know? I rely on her constantly. Without her, we don’t have anyone to create a decent strategy...”

“Sure you do. Right here.”

That’s right. We had a perfect replacement. Sarasa Saionji, still buried deep in her hoodie, leaned back in her seat leisurely as she threw her hat into the ring.

“I’ll do it. I’m sure Yuki’s a lot more experienced and popular with you guys, but when it comes to tactics, I won’t lose to her.”

“R-really? Hmm... Hey, Hiro, do you think we can trust her?”

“Huh? Oh, sure, no problem there. She might look a little funny, but she’s not lying.”

Nope. In fact, I doubted we’d ever find someone more qualified for the job. I nodded to give my approval, which was enough for Kagaya to lift her head.

“All right,” she said. “We’ll be counting on you, Hoodie Girl.”

“Of course. I’ll be putting you to *work*, though. So, for starters, can you show us what the peasant cards can do? You skipped over that.”

“Oh, right, right. One second.”

Kagaya’s fingers went to work on her tablet. The screen on her laptop PC displayed a list after a few moments.

Peasant Skills (Set A)

Cardectomy: Permanently removes one card in the opponent’s hand from the Game.

Unbeatable Hero: A special card that beats all others.

Reset All: Places all the opponent’s captured cards back in the pot.

Peasant Skills (Set B)

Explosive Growth: Boosts your number of captured cards by the current turn

number.

Glorious Revolution: From now on, all card relationships are reversed.

Trojan Horse: Lose against a royalty or knight card with this, and half of the player's captured cards are added to your captured cards. Fractions are rounded up.

"That's how they work," Kagaya said once Saionji and I had finished reading. "Each peasant card stays in effect as long as they remain in the pot. In other words, there needs to be a tie for these effects to trigger. That doesn't apply with Unbeatable Hero and Trojan Horse, though, obviously."

"You know, these effects all seem huge."

"Maybe, but you need a tie to activate them, which is a pretty tough restriction. Unless your opponent plays a peasant or assassin, they really are useless cards. Plus..."

"She'll cancel them out anyway."

"Yeah, I bet she will."

"..."

I winced a bit as I listened to Kagaya and Saionji. They were right. No matter how many power cards with mega-effects I had, Himeji had Force Control in her pocket. Presumably she'd use it to eliminate anything I tried to turn the Trial around.

"Okay. We have the info we need." Saionji turned toward me, finger in the air. "Let's put it all together. First off, in Clash of Triangles, the peasant cards are more powerful than you'd expect. Royalty, knights, and assassins are all stronger by themselves, but if you can sneak a peasant into the pot, the return is massive. It's enough that a losing player could make a comeback."

"The important question then becomes how to put my peasants into play...or how to keep Himeji from playing hers," I said.

"Mm-hmm. And even when you play some other card, you have to base every move on your peasants, I think. For example, you'll want to get rid of your assassins early because they can't beat peasants... However, if the assassins

leave the Game early, that lowers the value of the knights, and so on. You have to piece a million factors together to figure out what your best move is.”

“Normally, yeah. But not this time, sadly.”

“True...” Saionji nodded, pulling down the top of her hood. “Yuki’s going to break out Force Control, so she can engineer the first three turns any way she likes. She’ll set it up in the best way possible for her, and the worst possible way for us. But that means we can predict what she’ll do, because we know exactly how the first few turns will go.”

“Mhmmm. So what *will* happen, exactly?” Kagaya asked.

“I’ve actually been considering that. There are two cards she’ll want out of Shinohara’s deck immediately: the Explosive Growth peasant, because it could boost his capture count by up to ten, and the Trojan Horse peasant, which gives him a shot at recovering at any point during the Trial. Glorious Revolution has a huge effect on the Game, too, but the first two are far more dangerous. She’d never want those in play, that’s for sure.”

“That sounds true enough...,” I said. “But Force Control lasts for three turns, right? That gives her one more card to capture. Won’t she make that Glorious Revolution?”

“Hmm... It’s possible. However, Yuki already has Cardectomy, the peasant that can capture any card she wants from our hand. So really, she can remove four of our cards in three turns. Assuming two of them are Explosive Growth and Trojan Horse, I think it’s pretty clear what the other two will be, right?”

“Is it?” I pondered a bit. “Well, in terms of strength, I think it’d either be Glorious Revolution or the king. Oh, wait. The knight and assassin, maybe?”

“You got it. That’s what I’d do, at least.”

A smile peeked from beneath Saionji’s hoodie.

Removing the knight and assassin was critical. My hand would only have one of each. Without them, I’d have only royalty and peasant cards. In a Game about triangular relationships, that would leave me extremely vulnerable. Recovering after Force Control promised to be challenging.

“All right. Let me see if I have this straight,” I said, gathering my thoughts. “Himeji will use Force Control for the first three turns of the Game. She’ll start by playing her Cardectomy peasant against my assassin, triggering a tie and allowing her to use Cardectomy to capture my Trojan Horse. Then she’ll play her knight against my Explosive Growth peasant to defeat it, capturing the pot in the process, and finally, she’ll play a royalty card to take out my knight. The exact order may differ, but those’ll be her moves.”

“I think they will be, yeah. And if it all goes like we predict, Yuki will be at a significant advantage. All those cards will be going to her capture pile. By the time you’re allowed to play, she’ll be ahead by seven cards, counting the bonus one.”

“Seven...”

I knew Saionji was right, but I couldn’t help but groan at the sheer number. Seven cards. And given that eleven cards made for a victory in Clash of Triangles, she’d only need to add four more to her capture pile to win.

“Damn... It’s impossible. By that point, I could never win, even if I knew all of Himeji’s moves. I won’t have any knights or assassins, so it will be impossible to end every turn with a tie or win.”

“Yeah, our cards are gonna be a little too weak to turn this around. But...”

“Huh...?”

“On the other hand, if we can just turn that initial seven-card advantage around, we’ll have a decent shot.”

Saionji was grinning again. Her voice was heavy with confidence. She sounded bolder than ever, and her eyes being hidden by the hood only magnified it.

“Listen,” she continued. “You may not know this, but there’s an Ability called Enchant reserved for Six Stars and Seven Stars. Basically, it’s a support Ability that lets you add additional effects to certain elements. In the context of this Trial, you could use it to add any skill you want to one of the peasant cards in your hand. There are some limits to what you can write in, but I think stuff like ‘trade capture piles’ ought to be permissible.”

“Trade capture piles?”

Saionji's suggestion made me bring a hand up to my mouth. Swapping capture piles would certainly make things seem more favorable for me. My hand would still be weak, but I'd only need four more cards to win. Even with nothing but royalty and peasants, I might pull out a win.

The question was how I'd get access to a Six Star Ability.

"You think you can make it happen, Kagaya?"

"Huh?"

"I'm asking if you can create a cheat that works as closely as possible to the Enchant Ability Hoodie Girl described. To be exact, I'd need something that would break into the Clash of Triangles system and swap Himeji's capture pile with mine. That, and you need to override our device displays to make it look like the effect of one of my peasant cards. The goal is to fool Akizuki and have her believe I'm using Enchant to take the lead."

"...Right. And like we discussed, we can't contact the Company right now because Akizuki might listen in on us. We literally can't ask anyone besides you, Kagaya."

"Ohhhh... It sounds tough when you lay it all out like that, Hiro..." Kagaya groaned for a bit, but she must have decided to do it because she bobbed her head in the affirmative a few seconds later.

"All right. I feel a little out of my element, but I'm still the Company's electronics girl. I'm gonna give you the best cheats you've ever seen, Hiro!"

"Thank you very much, Kagaya."

"Anytime," she replied with a wink. "You can repay the favor by getting Himeji back!" Kagaya stood, evidently recharged, and zoomed out of the living room, shouting "I'm gonna go check the server room!" over her shoulder.

"Hmm." Saionji lifted her hood as she watched Kagaya go. "Well, at least we've got a firm direction now. Hopefully she makes it in time."

"Ah, I wouldn't worry about that. Despite everything else, she's a true genius. The provost handpicked her to be a part of this team."

"That only makes it sound more precarious...but all right. Just make sure you

install the Abilities you need, all right? You need something that can make things go your way. Peek is the classic choice. In fact, filling all your slots with Peek isn't a bad idea."

"All of them...?"

"Yeah. It's powerful, but as a Two Star, you only get a level-two Peek, which lasts two or three turns at best. And no matter how much the Company's cheats interfere, you'll still be at a hand disadvantage."

"Oh... Right."

I nodded a little. Installing as many Peeks as I could was certainly a safe bet. Himeji would have every card type from king to assassin in her hand once I got to play, plus a Reset All peasant that could put my capture pile back into the pot. I'd only be able to deal with that if I had extra knowledge.

"..."

The more closely I looked at things, the more concerns I had, but this was the best course of action. Clash of Triangles had seemed impossible at first, but thanks to Saionji and Kagaya, I saw victory in the distance. I knew we would win, as long as there were no more unpleasant surprises. I was going to crush Akizuki's schemes.

"But," I blurted out, "do you really think that's good enough?"

"Huh?" Saionji looked up. "What do you mean, is it good enough? You're confident you're up to this, right?"

"Sure, but Himeji told me not to aim for victory. I still don't know what she meant by that, but I'm not sure we should ignore it. I definitely can't lose, but..."

"..."

I knew I was being uselessly vague. Unfortunately, it was all I could do to blurt out my concern. Had Himeji only meant it to be a threat? Perhaps it was a line Akizuki had fed her. Maybe there was some other meaning to it. I didn't know.

#

Kagaya wound up spending the night at my place as she coded her cheats for

me. Our strategy meeting didn't wrap up until one thirty in the morning, so she didn't want to bother traveling back home. By her own admission, she had all the equipment she needed here. Apparently, this was a more convenient workplace for her. I offered my help, but she shooed me away, warning that staying up too late would affect my behavior at school, to say nothing of my performance in the Trial. She was totally right, and although I hated to leave her alone, I went ahead with my evening routine, showering and preparing for bed.

Everything went fine until there was a soft knock on the door.

"I-I'm all set, Shinohara."

"..."

An embarrassed voice announced Saionji's arrival, and the door opened to reveal her fresh from a bath. She wasn't going around in a bath towel, of course, but her identity-concealing hoodie was gone. She'd changed into some light pajamas pulled from the guest closet. She must have taken pains to dry that long hair of hers, because it didn't look wet at all. Still, one look at the light steam rising from her, and it was clear she had only just gotten out of the bath. It was accompanied by a powerful, mind-bending aroma from either the shampoo or the body soap.

"Y-you don't have to stare at me like that...idiot."

Time had all but stopped for me from the moment Saionji entered my room. She didn't take it well. Embarrassed, she turned her back to me. Then, kneeling in a very ladylike fashion, she climbed into the futon I'd laid for her on the floor.

That's right.

Why was Saionji inviting herself into my bedroom in her pajamas? Well, because she apparently wanted to sleep in this room. She reasoned it would allow her to come to Kagaya's aid should the need arise, but other concerns were also involved.

Here's what she'd had to say about it half an hour before.

"Hey, there's a curfew at the Saionji house. It's actually eight in the evening. Usually, I stick to it to retain my prim rich-girl image, but...you called me out here late at night. I had to sneak past my maid to get out of the place. I left a

note, so I don't think it'll become a huge problem, but if I go home now, I'm gonna get yelled at a whole lot. At worst, they might start monitoring my activities. What will I do if that keeps me from helping you in the future? I can't take that risk until we've got Yuki back.

"So if it's all right with you, I'd like to stay here toni—Wha?!

"?!?!?!?!!

"Me? Stay here?! In your room?! You and me, in the same bed, your head resting on my arm?! B-b-but we haven't even known each other for a month! We haven't sent our papers over to city hall yet! You haven't even met my parents...

"A-and yeah, we did hold hands a little, but...ohhh."

Looking back, she all but dug her own grave. There was no retracting a suggestion she'd made, so she agreed to stay over. Admittedly, I could envision a world where I didn't mind her sleeping here. The mansion had many empty rooms, including ones specifically for guests. Saionji wasn't happy taking any of those, however.

"Jeez..."

I glared at the ceiling, feeling the heat in my cheeks. "If you're that embarrassed about it, why don't you use some other room?"

"I—I told you I don't want to. I'd feel so lonely, staying by myself in one of those huge chambers."

"Then how do you normally sleep, *my lady*?"

"Well, after the maid leaves my room, I have a big stuffed anima—*Ahem*. I mean, I'm usually better at enduring it, all right? I'm just a little short on MP tonight."

After that poor excuse, she rustled around a bit, turning her back to me... Evidently, Saionji liked to tie her hair up when she was in bed. It gave me a chance to see the back of her neck, something I never got a glimpse at. Below, her shoulders and the start of her back peeked through her pajamas. I immediately reached for my device to turn off all the lights.

Close one...



Why it had been close, I couldn't really say. In the dark, there was only a ticking clock, slow breathing, and the occasional rustling of fabric when one of us changed position. It felt almost deafening, and that's how things were for the next ten minutes.

"Hey... Are you still awake, Shinohara?"

A whisper floated through the lightless room. The voice sounded nearer than before. I presumed Saionji had rolled over to face me.

"Um," I said, heart beating fast. "Yes."

"Really? Hee-hee! Good. I didn't know what I'd do if you fell asleep first. I'm kind of a night owl, so I'm usually not too sleepy around this time."

"Really? It's almost three."

"Normally, I only sleep three hours, between four and seven. Sometimes I stay in bed all day on weekends, but..."

"Wow..."

She was one of those short sleepers? I was a bit jealous of all the extra time it afforded her. And not to get off topic, but the dark had us chatting in pretty hushed tones. It made Saionji's breaths between her words more prevalent. Even when she snickered, it sounded more mature than usual. It made me tingle a little.

"Hee-hee! So anyway, Shinohara..."

We continued chatting while my consciousness began to grow hazy. Topics included acting, lies, complaints about school life, and the real Saionji, whom she occasionally contacted over video calls.

"I'm counting on you, okay? With Yuki, I mean."

"Mmph..."

"Because I know you can do it. You beat Kugasaki—that proves you're better at cheating than pretty much anyone I know. And you're my partner in crime... So I know Noa Akizuki won't beat you."

That encouragement, delivered just before I passed out, had a strangely kind

ring to it in my ears.

#

Monday morning, the fifth day of the 4WC.

After I had Kagaya install her completed program on my device, I watched Saionji head off for school. The Company had lent her an Ohga uniform. Apparently, it kept an inventory of them for disguise purposes. After seeing Saionji off, I left for Eimei School.

“...”

Obviously, people would be able to send me Trial requests the moment I set foot on school premises. However, word that I was in the middle of a Trial with someone had evidently spread pretty quickly after yesterday's events, so I didn't have any would-be challengers running over. I felt the typical sort of attention I garnered as a Seven Star, but nothing else.

Himeji attended school as usual, and we ran into each other on the way. When her pure-blue eyes met mine, I lost my breath for a moment. We didn't talk about anything. She toyed with her silvery hair while acting apologetic, then bowed and entered the classroom.

I was prepared for this, but it stings that she won't even speak with me.

None of it showed on my face, but I was pretty upset. I took my seat at my desk and stared ahead vacantly.

“Phew...”

“Oh, I know just how you feel, Hiro! Wanna hear my impression of Shirayuki? I've been practicing, and I know I'll do it really great after pulling an all-nighter with a hangover!”

“No thank you. Also, go to bed already.”

I shook my head, banishing the eerily perky voice from my earpiece.

According to Ms. Nanachan, who arrived after the bell rang a few minutes later, fewer than two thousand students remained in the Fourth Ward Challenge as of last night. The event had begun with roughly nine thousand participants, which meant over seven thousand had been knocked out. Ms.

Nanachan explained we might have a winner as soon as midday tomorrow at this rate.

“...”

Everyone immediately threw their gazes at me, and I took them in stride. No matter how the 4WC shook out, getting through my Trial with Himeji came first.

The school day felt like a marathon. I didn't have to run from any potential opponents, yet the mental fatigue made it feel exhaustingly long. I sat next to Himeji almost the entire time, yet she didn't say a word to me. We even spent our lunch break separated from each other. That alone, the mere absence of Himeji, made me feel as though I'd been thrown into some alternate timeline. It was bizarre.

I'd better get going.

Once Tsuji, Tatara, and the other classmates I frequently talked to were gone, I picked up my bag and stood from my seat. Quietly walking forward, I slid open the door at the back of the room.

“...I've been expecting you, Master.”

Himeji was there, having left class a short while before me. She was back in her uniform for the first time since Friday, and the tension in her voice made her seem rougher than usual.

“Hey. It's been a while. At least, it feels that way.”

“It's not even been a full day since I called you.”

“Guess not...”

“Still, I was thinking the same thing, Master.”

With those softly spoken words, Himeji turned away from me. It was probably her way of saying “Don't pry any further.” I'm sure Akizuki had forbidden her from giving me any information. She could be monitoring us right now. Keeping my guard up was for the best.

I started walking at a slow pace that I'll charitably call hesitant. I didn't get very far before Himeji spoke again.

“The fourth floor of Building F, the Applied Sciences Building, isn’t being used today. I’d like to hold the Trial there. A large audience will make things difficult.”

“All right. That’s fine.”

I quickly agreed to the perfectly reasonable request. Himeji and I garnered enough attention already, but something so commercially alluring as a Trial between a maid and her master was too exciting for Libra to ignore. It’d be a pain, especially because I intended to cheat my ass off. The fewer spectators the better.

Kagaya was up from her nap, so I had her guide me down a more secluded route to the Applied Sciences Building without incident.

“Oh! Wow! Eh-heh-heh! We meet again! What a coincidence, Hiroto! ♪”

The moment I made it to the entrance, a girl popped out from nearby—Noa Akizuki. The upperclassman with the twin chestnut ponytails. The Six Star Little Devil who never showed her real self. The girl who had used Himeji to concoct this whole scenario beamed, bright and cunning.

“...”

Her demeanor was hardly a surprise anymore. I glared at her, but Akizuki insisted on acting like she’d simply run into me.

“We keep meeting each other by coincidence,” she said, tilting her head as she leaned forward. “It’s really gotta be fate or something, doesn’t it? Hee-hee-hee! And I’d be perfectly okay with that, Hiroto! ♡”

“You’re shameless,” I replied. The words were only partially an act. “If you mean that, then you’ve got some serious problems with your memory.”

“Aww, that’s sooo mean!” Akizuki puffed up her cheeks in faux anger. “This is your chance to make Noa all yours.”

She was suddenly wearing a very different sort of smile as she stomped her way toward me. She peered up at my face. Her citrus scent threatened to knock me over.

“You’ve got a Trial against your maid coming up, don’t you, Hiroto? I think it’d

be really nice if I could watch! ♪”

“Watch...? Don’t you mean interfere?”

“Aw, c’mon, I’m not gonna do that! I just wanna see you at your coolest in the middle of a battle! And I wanna cheer you on, too! ‘You can do it, Hiroto! ♡ You can do it! ♡’”

Every gesture, every intonation, was as cloying as possible. I hardly felt inclined to agree to her spectating, but Trials were public events. If someone wished to watch, there was nothing I could do. Refusing wouldn’t accomplish much for me. It was better to keep this girl in sight than let her run around doing whatever she pleased.

“*Hahhh...* Do whatever you want, Akizuki. I was worried I wouldn’t have much of an audience anyway.”

The secretive mastermind before me received my response with a playful grin.

#

Game: Clash of Triangles

- Players begin the Game carrying a hand of ten cards.
- There are six different types of cards: king, prince, queen, knight, assassin, and peasant.
- The players each pick a card from their hands and play them simultaneously. This comprises one turn. The winner is decided depending on the cards played.
- Royalty (the king, prince, and queen) beats knights, knights beat assassins, and assassins beat royalty.
- Royalty and knights beat peasants. Assassins and peasants tie, as do any two identical cards.
- Kings beat princes, princes beat queens, and queens beat kings.
- If the two played cards are tied, they are added to the pot. If one beats the other, the winning player captures both played cards, as well as any cards

in the pot at that time. (A bonus card is placed in the pot at the start of the Game.)

- The Game continues until at least one side runs out of cards in their hand. Whoever has captured more cards at that point is the winner.

We were in a classroom on the western edge of the Applied Sciences Building. At some point, it had been repurposed into a makeshift storehouse.

“Okay... That ought to do it.”

Himeji and I were setting up the Trial, not that it took much work. We only had to move the cardboard boxes and folders strewn around to the back of the room, clearing enough space in front of the teacher’s desk to play. There we set desks facing each other to create an impromptu battlefield.

“Thanks, Himeji.”

“It had to be done anyway. I apologize for making you help with this.”

She bowed and pulled a seat out for me. I obliged, and with another bow, she quietly turned around and briskly took the chair opposite mine.

“Ohhhh! Hee-hee! Wow. A real maid and everything! ♪”

Akizuki threw me a sly smile from her spot at the teacher’s desk. Neither Himeji nor I told her the rules of Clash of Triangles, but she undoubtedly knew them already. I saw no reason to offer her any courtesy. I turned my attention from her to my opponent.

“Okay...I think we’re ready, Himeji. Feel free to start whenever you like.”

“...All right.”

Her shoulders jerked slightly. Had I startled her? She released that tension after a moment, however, and nodded. Those pure-blue eyes were trained on me below silver locks. After a glance at Akizuki, Himeji spoke.

“Master... First, I want to thank you very much for agreeing to this selfish request of mine. Under normal circumstances, I’d be at your side, not facing you. I know it makes me a failure as a maid, Master, yet here we are.”

“...”

“As I made clear yesterday, I will not lose this Trial. Not even against you... In fact, it’s *because* you’re my opponent that I absolutely cannot afford to fail.”

“...I see.”

“I promise...I will give this my *full effort*.”

The challenge had been issued. As though in response, her device, which she’d set on the desk, released a soft white light, signaling the start of the Trial. Numerous projected screens surrounded Himeji instantly, and ten cards appeared before her, floating in the air.

“I have invoked the support Ability Change Probability level four. Of the two hands normally assigned at random, I will choose set A.”

“...Okay.”

The spectacle had me in awe for a moment, but I managed to reply. *You’re all right. You’re all right. You prepared for this. Just stay calm, do what you have to, and you can totally win this.*

“Phew...”

I picked up my device, and the same projected displays formed around me, albeit without Himeji’s theatrics. Ten cards appeared before me—one king, one prince, one queen, one knight, one assassin, and five peasants. It was definitely set B, the “weaker” hand.

All I have to do now is work out Himeji’s strategy and make the best move. That would be the best approach to Clash of Triangles, but...

I looked up from my hand. Himeji nodded.

“I apologize, Master. My turn is not over yet. I’m activating the Four Star Ability Force Control. I will make your card selections for the next three turns.”

“Ohhhhh!”

Akizuki cheered at Himeji’s flat statement.

“Force Control! The maid’s going full throttle from the start! ♡ Hee-hee-hee... C’mon, Hiroto! If you let up, you’re gonna lose! Am I gonna see a Seven Star go tumbling down today?”

“...”

I did my best to ignore Akizuki's obnoxious remarks. Things had played out as expected so far.

Force Control...an Ability that lets her control my moves. Himeji can remove all randomness and put herself in the best position possible. If our predictions from the strategy conference are correct, then by the third turn, I'll have lost my knight, my assassins, and both of the peasants I can use to recover.

By that, I meant my peasant with Explosive Growth and the one with Trojan Horse. The former upped my capture count by the current turn number, and the latter took half my opponent's captured cards and made them mine. Both were significant threats. I was confident Himeji would remove them from play.

If so, the Peek Abilities I brought won't be enough to stage a comeback. It will be impossible, no matter how hard I try. I'll need to start cheating the moment Force Control ends.

“I will now make our moves for the first turn.”

While I busied myself reviewing strategy, Himeji looked right at me and quietly raised her right hand to tap one of the cards lined up in front of her. Normally, I'd make a selection, too, but under Force Control, I wasn't free to make a selection. A white light outlined one of the cards in my hand, despite me doing nothing.

“Okay... This is our first turn.”

At Himeji's announcement, the two cards flipped around. Himeji had picked a knight for herself, and for me, she'd selected the peasant with Glorious Revolution. Knights beat peasants, so Himeji naturally won. Glorious Revolution didn't trigger. Three cards were placed in Himeji's capture pile, the two she'd won and the bonus added to the pot at the start (likely placed there to ensure the total number of cards was odd). I had seen this coming, but it was still a pretty lethal first turn.

There was one thing that differed from my expectations, though.

Why Glorious Revolution?

My eyebrows bunched up while I thought on this. The Glorious Revolution peasant switched all cards' strengths and weaknesses for the rest of the match when invoked. It could certainly have given me an advantage over Himeji, but did she need to spend a Force Control turn getting rid of it?

"Continuing...I will play this."

Before I could think on it much longer, Himeji made her next selections. Force Control would end after the third turn, and I had no way of stopping it. All I could do was sit silently and observe.

Here's how things shook out:

Turn two:

Himeji: Peasant (Cardectomy). Me: Peasant (no effect).

Result: Tie. Both cards placed in pot. Cardectomy takes effect, and my peasant (Explosive Growth) card is removed from my hand.

Turn three:

Himeji: Peasant (Unbeatable Hero). Me: King.

Result: Unbeatable Hero takes effect, defeating my king. Himeji captures all cards, including the ones left in the pot after the last turn.

"..."

"Eh-heh-heh... Boy, this is one merciless maid! ♪" Akizuki was clearly enjoying herself immensely from her spot on the teacher's desk. "In just two turns, you've taken two peasant skills from Hiroto, and just *look* at how big your captured-card lead is... I guess the maid's revolting against her master, huh? Does Hiroto not matter to you anymore?"

"...Quiet, please."

"Awww! You could at least play along! Also..." Akizuki hopped off the desk, her feet lightly tapping on the floor. She was all smiles as she walked up to Himeji with her hands behind her back. Bending her knees a little, Akizuki brought her face close to Himeji's ear. "Did I say you could talk to me like that, maid?"

“...I’m sorry.”

“No prob! Just be more careful, okay? ♪”

Akizuki enthusiastically nodded at the slightly pale Himeji, then hopped back up on her desk. I watched this in silence, secretly thinking about something else.

This is weird.

Honestly, that much was obvious. Himeji’s moves while Force Control was active were bizarre, no matter how many times I reviewed them. They were just too far removed from the scenario Saionji had given me. It would have been impossible to anticipate Himeji’s selections exactly, but they should have resembled our predictions somewhat. She should have done as Saionji expected if she wanted to build a strong advantage.

This wasn’t adding up. There didn’t seem to be any meaning to it at all.

She left Trojan Horse untouched, the card that gives me the best chance at turning this around. I still have my knight and assassin, too, which gives me options to compete with next turn. And she used Unbeatable Hero, which can defeat anything, to take out a completely middling card... What’s going on?

Perhaps Himeji had made a mistake? That felt pretty unlikely. It’d be one thing if we were playing on the fly, but we had half a day of preparation behind us. There was no way Himeji had made a simple error.

Plus...Akizuki was acting weird, too.

“Eh-heh-heh... Looking pretty lost there, Hiroto. You okay? You’re going to lose to the maid at this rate. I sure wish I could see you do something cool... ♡”

“...”

She leaned in from the teacher’s desk, smiling sweetly.

Admittedly, I was at an overwhelming disadvantage, yet Akizuki acted like this was already over, and that didn’t feel right. We were nowhere near a checkmate yet. I still had a chance to recover. If she thought I was set up for inevitable defeat, then she was mistaken.

However, it was prudent not to assume Akizuki had grown overconfident and

missed the reality of the Trial. She was a Six Star and ranked higher than Kugasaki. This was the Little Devil of Eimei, who always concealed her true feelings. Noa Akizuki was a powerful enemy to have, someone even Saionji acknowledged as a major threat.

This has to be some kind of bait.

I slowly brought my right hand to my mouth. What if Akizuki had forced this situation to have me win as dramatically as possible while she watched from a superior position? If that was her aim, then things fell into place. Chances were, something bad would happen to Himeji if she lost. That's why Akizuki needled me with that sly grin of hers while leaving a clear path to victory for me.

That was her real goal. This Trial was a trap.

Shoot. I realized it a bit too late.

I gritted my teeth a little as I chided myself. My picking up on it at all was fortunate, of course, but I didn't feel very lucky. Acting on this knowledge would be difficult. If I beat Himeji, everything would go as Akizuki planned, and if I lost, I'd be eliminated from the Fourth Ward Challenge. Actually, given how blatantly Akizuki and that anonymous external element targeted me, I'd probably have worse things to worry about than losing the event. Akizuki's scheme was perfect. I could see why they called her the Little Devil.

Another question occurred to me.

Would Himeji really just do everything Akizuki says?

She was the head of the Company, a powerful, cheating maid who stopped at nothing to win her Games. Yes, Shirayuki Himeji was technically in the service industry, but she wasn't some pawn who obeyed every command. If Akizuki had ordered her to lose this Trial on purpose, Himeji would have pressed the *Give Up* button on her device instead of going to all this trouble. That would've been more efficient.

But she hadn't, so something had to be up. Himeji wasn't mindlessly dancing to Akizuki's tune at all. She had some kind of plan, one I hadn't caught on to yet.

Think... Think. There must be a signal. How would she communicate without alerting Akizuki?

I stared at my desk, plumbing the depths of my memories. Himeji's only opportunity to signal me would've been the phone call last night. What had she said? I recalled she'd mentioned not being able to be with me, and that she couldn't explain why. She'd insisted that I had to lose, making it clear she'd compete to win in our Trial...

...Hang on.

She didn't say that. She only asked me not to win.

I brought my head up, my eyes wide open. I finally understood. Akizuki had set it up so that Himeji couldn't lose for some reason, and Himeji had begged me not to win. But that was *all* she'd said. She'd never said that she had to win. When I reviewed the Trial's progression, things fell into place. She'd spared my Trojan Horse—my lifeline—to ensure I wasn't instantly eliminated. She'd left my knight and assassin untouched to guarantee the three-way competition between the cards continued. She'd gotten rid of her Unbeatable Hero card, which could've been a menacing threat in the endgame.

And most of all...

The Cardectomy peasant... Its skill forcibly removes a powerful card from an opponent's hand, but that's not all. The card removed is out of the Trial for good, so the number of cards in play drops from twenty-one to twenty. An even number.

That had to be it.

A single bonus card appeared in the pot when the Trial began. It brought the total number of cards in Clash of Triangles up to an odd number to prevent ties. However, Cardectomy had brought the total back down to twenty. We were playing with an even number of winnable cards. A tie game was possible.

In a Trial where neither winning nor losing was permissible, a draw was the only way to end it safely.

Of course, I had no conclusive evidence that was Himeji's intention. Her ignoring my Trojan Horse for Explosive Growth felt like pretty convincing evidence, though. Explosive Growth awarded me a bonus based on the current turn number. Apart from Cardectomy, that was the only way a player could

alter the number of available cards.

“...”

Himeji was staring at me, looking much the same as before—with that colorless, transparent gaze. Perhaps that was her way of praying I would take notice.

All right.

I steeled my resolve and tapped my earpiece, signaling to Kagaya that I wanted any current cheats deactivated. “*Huh?!*” I heard her exclaim, but I wasn’t in any position to explain.

“...?”

I could tell that Akizuki was looking at me closely. She’d noticed my unusual movements. I didn’t need her commenting on that, so I coughed and gave Himeji a bold grin.

“Sorry for the wait. Let’s move on to the fourth turn.”

“...Yes, Master.”

Himeji nodded and promptly chose a card. Although it was placed face down, my Peek Ability was active, so I knew what she’d selected. It was her second knight. No matter how you tried to justify it, this wasn’t a normal move.

“Okay,” I calmly stated, “I’ll go...with this.”

I chose my assassin. In Clash of Triangles, an assassin beat a king, but lost to a knight. I deliberately picked a losing card, and with that, Himeji’s capture pile increased by two.

“Ah...”

It was Akizuki, not Himeji, who was surprised. That little gasp couldn’t have been on purpose. I shot her a glance. She was already waving her hands and looking for an excuse.

“Ah, um... Sorry, Hiroto! I was just a little startled.”

“Startled? Why? Are things not going as you expected?”

“! ...Hmm? What’s that mean, huh? ’Cause I sure don’t know. I don’t have a

plan. I'm just a little antsy because you're getting pushed around so much! ♡"

"Oh, really?" Akizuki's expression seemed stonier than before. "You might be on the edge of your seat for the remainder of the Trial, then."

I focused back on my cards.

My next choice was the queen, which was knocked out by Himeji's assassin. That brought her number of captured cards up to eleven. She had the majority required to win. However, we both still had cards in our hands, so the Game wasn't over. I played a prince to Himeji's king, then a knight to her prince, increasing her capture pile. She used the Reset All peasant card (the one that would put all my captured cards back into the pot), but since I had yet to win any cards, it had no effect. I countered it with one of my no-effect peasants, ensuring Reset All swung and missed.

"...Hey, what's going on?" Akizuki asked in a strained voice, her hands balled into little fists. "What are you up to, Hiroto? You should play a little more seriously."

"Just keep quiet and watch for me, okay?" I replied curtly, brushing her off.

Before much longer, we were at the end of the eighth turn. Himeji had two cards left, and thanks to Cardectomy, I had only one in my hand.

"Your next turn will be the last, Master," Himeji said quietly. "I have fifteen captured cards, and only two are in the pot, so I have essentially won the match. But your final card is the peasant with the Trojan Horse skill...letting you steal half of my captured cards. It's the most vicious and effective peasant card remaining. However, that skill only works if the peasant is defeated by royalty or a knight. Nothing will happen otherwise."

"Yep, that's right. And based on your previous plays, you're currently holding a queen and an assassin. Play your assassin, and you win."

"That seems to be the case... I've already picked my card."

Himeji's selection lit up and floated toward me face down. If this was her assassin, the Trial would end in my defeat. After all of Saionji's and Kagaya's help, I'd be knocked out of the 4WC, a bad ending if ever there was one. It would torpedo my reputation as a Seven Star. I'd been acting like I was the best

on the Academy, yet I stood to lose to my own servant. People would deride and mock me, and Eimei would fall into Noa Akizuki's hands.

Yet for all the risk...I believed in Himeji. This Clash of Triangles Game wasn't some pointless conflict. It was the perfect stage for us to double-cross Akizuki, and I knew it.

"..."

I took one final look into Himeji's blue eyes. She reciprocated, drawing her gaze down only to raise it back to me again. Akizuki cocked an eyebrow, ignorant of the meaning of this gesture, but I got the message. This was one of the many signals Himeji had worked out with me before she transferred to Eimei and the 4WC started. Its meaning could be summed up in three words.

Yes, my master.

"Hahhh..."

I smiled fearlessly, paying no mind to Akizuki's reaction.

"My final Peek Ability ran out last turn. I can't see what you just picked...but I don't need any Abilities to know. That's a queen, Himeji."

"A queen... Are you sure?"

"If it's not, I'll tell you dozens of my most embarrassing secrets."

"...Heh-heh. I see. That's a shame."

After a lengthy pause, Himeji narrowed her eyes at me. They brimmed with a soft grace. A gentle smile spread across her face.

"I would've liked to hear all those secrets."

The card flipped over. It was a queen.

"...!"

Akizuki must have known this was coming for a while now, but her usual sickly-sweet demeanor had vanished. Frustration contorted her expression. Her dainty shoulders quivered, and her fists pressed so hard against the teacher's desk that it undoubtedly hurt.

We let her be to wrap up the Trial. A queen beat a peasant, so Himeji won the

final turn. She captured the cards in play and those in the pot. However, the conditions for Trojan Horse were fulfilled, so I took half of her capture pile, rounding up in case of fractions. Himeji possessed nineteen captured cards, so ten of them went to me.

I had no hand remaining, meaning the Game ended with the ninth turn. The single card left in Himeji's hand was automatically added to her capture pile for a total of ten.

The score was even, and the Clash of Triangles concluded in a draw.

#

““ ... ””

Nobody said anything for a little while after the Trial ended. Normally, Akizuki would be bounding around the room, annoying everyone present, yet she sat quietly, head lowered, making the whole place feel awkward.

However, she soon forced herself up and off the desk. She approached us with her hands behind her back and a smile carved into her face.

“Eh...heh-heh... A draw, huh? How will this be treated?”

“It won't be treated as anything, Ms. Akizuki. A tie is a tie. The Trial itself has been conducted, so we will no longer be 'In Combat,' but neither of us lost, so my master and I will remain in the Fourth Ward Challenge.”

“Hmm... Wow, neat. Nice one, Hiroto. Guess you sure do care about that maid, huh? Sorry, I think I'm feeling a little tired. I got to watch Hiroto in a Trial, so I think I'll just go home and—”

“Hold it, Akizuki.”

The moment the erratic Akizuki turned around, I quietly stood and grabbed her wrist. This startled her, and her shoulders jumped. Her legs froze before they could take her to the hallway.

“...! Um, what is it, Hiroto? I know I'm so angelically cute that you can't help but want me around, but nobody likes a guy who acts all aggressive, y'know?”

“Drop it. There's no point in pretending anymore. Why don't you tell me what you're up to?”

“Wh...what do you mean?”

“Stop playing dumb. You used Himeji to try and take me out, didn’t you? And not just so I’d be dropped from the 4WC. You’ve been working to drag down the greatest student on the Academy since before this event began.”

“...!”

Akizuki stiffened a bit, but it only lasted an instant before she plastered that smile back on. “Huhhh?” she asked. “What’re you talking about? I have no idea what that means. I just happened to be—”

“No, that couldn’t be the case.”

Himeji stood, too, shooting down Akizuki’s excuse. She quickly checked her device and nodded with relief, then fixed her pure-blue eyes on the Little Devil.

“Last night, Ms. Akizuki, you stopped me on the way to the convenience store long enough to hack into my device, installing an illegal application called Emissary on it. The program logs all data transferred to and from the device and uses its microphone and camera to spy on the owner. It’s a very unpleasant and vicious set of features.”

“Oh... I see. That’s why you couldn’t go back to our dorm, huh? And why I never heard from you before that call.”

“Yes. Our relationship is cleaner than the mineral water bottled near Mt. Fuji, but we still share a few things that don’t need to be made public. After neutralizing my ability to resist, Ms. Akizuki gave me an ultimatum. ‘You can’t drop out of the 4WC or abandon your current Trial. Follow my instructions, and I’ll remove Emissary from your device.’”

“So your only choice was to fight against me instead. Did Akizuki choose the Game we played, too?”

“She did, yes. She didn’t explicitly order me to win or lose...but my victory would mean you’d be out of the 4WC, a result we had to avoid at all costs. Your winning would also result in tragedy, however.”

“Yeah, I had an inkling, but what, exactly?”

“The Emissary program. The Ability contains special code that triggers when

the device owner loses a Game or Trial. It moves the program to the winner's device. Had I lost, all of that data snooping and video monitoring would have been installed on your device."

"..."

Himeji's explanation left me silent. That was frightening. Emissary would have made it impossible to keep my lie going. If Himeji hadn't been quick-witted enough to leave the door open for a tie, if Saionji and Kagaya hadn't provided their assistance, if I hadn't picked up on Himeji's signal, if any of the pieces had been missing, things would have ended very badly. Even thinking about it made me shudder a bit.

"That is all I know." Himeji clasped her hands together in front of her and faced Akizuki. "Obviously, I was forbidden from telling you any of that before, but now that Emissary can't activate, I have no reason to cooperate. So, Ms. Akizuki, do you still intend to play innocent?"

"Er, I told you, I don't know anything about that. Are you two trying to bully me or something? I might be laid back, but I'll seriously get upset if you don't stop!"

"Play dumb if you like, but last night's access logs are still intact. They're currently bugged, but if we have the old vixen of Eimei—Provost Ichinose, I mean—examine them, I think it will be clear that your device was used to hack into mine."

"..."

Himeji's follow-up attack was enough to finally make Akizuki hang her head. She bit her lip, as though holding something back. Her clenched hands trembled. A few seconds later, she looked up and glared at me.

"Why...?"

"Hmm?"

"Why...why did it have to be you?!"

The pained shout echoed through the classroom and carried unimaginably intense anger. Once Akizuki had been soft and sweet, but now everything she'd

bottled up was flowing free.

“Why?!” she raged, slamming her right hand on a nearby desk. “Why?! Why?! I did everything I could, all this prep work, and I *still* couldn’t beat you?! Why do I have to be the loser?! This is crazy... All of this is crazy! I know you’re cheating, Hiroto! I know you used cheap, cowardly tricks to work your way up! And I have to exist beneath you? It’s insane!”

“...Cheating? What do you mean?”

“Heh-heh... What do you think? All of it. It’s unthinkable that some new transfer student would instantly become a Seven Star. Someone rising to the top of the Academy while putting in zero work? You have to be cheating. I’m a cute girl and a good one. I hate cheaters. Didn’t I tell you before? That survey said most people believed you’d win the 4WC, Hiroto.”



“Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, you know what? At the end of the last school year, a similar survey asked who’d win the next 4WC. I was first back then. People just assumed that I’d win, that I’d totally hold out until the end. And I thought so, too. But...but the moment you came to this school, everyone immediately turned their backs to me and went straight to you!”

“...”

“It makes no sense... This has to be some kind of mistake. Or a disaster, one of the two. Because I’ve spent *years* working, building all of this up, and *you* just swooped in and took it all from me.”

Akizuki took a step toward me, a sharpened glint in her eye. She was certain that I’d cheated, but not because she had any sort of evidence. She just found it unacceptable that I’d become the best on the Academy so quickly after arriving. That sort of viewpoint wasn’t uncommon. Considering the world she lived in, I couldn’t dismiss her feelings callously. Once, she’d been favored to win the Fourth Ward Challenge, considered worthy of becoming champion of Eimei School. To her, my presence really must’ve been a nuisance. All the expectations, praise, trust, envy, and everything else meant to come her way—I had taken it all.

“So...so I wanted revenge,” she continued, something like a boastful sneer on her face. “And the 4WC, the clash of Eimei students, was the perfect opportunity. I knew from your previous Games that your maid is your confidant. So I scouted things out a few times to make sure of it. Heh-heh... You’re partners, right? I bet she’s really important to you. I figured that with the maid out of the picture, you wouldn’t be able to fight the way you typically do. I created this situation to make you battle her. I got rid of the other high-ranked students by making them take each other out before they could get in my way, and I cleaned up the dorks who’d try to cheat their way to victory. And it was all for nothing...”

“Hmm... Is that why more players have been eliminated than usual?” I asked.

“Hee-hee-hee! It sure is! ♪ After all, Hiroto, I don’t need anyone but you! ♡”

Akizuki was using her cutesy voice to say some pretty scary things. She grinned at me eerily for a bit, but ultimately, her shoulders slumped.

“But...all that preparation didn’t help. I even made a deal with that devil...”

“Devil?” I parroted.

“Forget it. It’s just an expression.”

Akizuki looked conflicted for a moment, but shook her head, trying to play it off as nothing. I considered this, studying her expression and body language.

The devil... She’s probably referring to the mastermind, the external meddler the provost mentioned. Akizuki only got this far because she worked with someone. In other words, she cheated. She briefly deactivated the 4WC’s time restrictions...and that Emissary Ability’s clearly illegal, too. I doubt Akizuki made all that happen alone.

Noa Akizuki had turned out to be directly involved in the case the provost had asked me to investigate. That was lucky. I let out a light exhalation.

“Regardless, your scheme’s finished, and you’re going to tell me everything you know. About your revenge and anything else relev—”

“Eh-heh-heh! What’re you talking about, Hiroto?” Akizuki’s abruptly low voice cut me off. With a dry “Ah-ha!” she gave me another twisted grin. “It’s not over yet... I can’t let something like this defeat me.”

“Not over? How?”

“Ha! How do you think?” Pure joy entered her smile. “Look, Hiroto, I’m cute and smart, so I had another plan in place for just such an occasion.”

She put a finger in the air. Anxiety built in my gut.

“You know the Emissary I installed on your maid’s device? Well, it’s got a special feature I didn’t tell her about. It’s a dual-layer Ability, and when the Emissary effect is disabled, it automatically switches to the *other* function.”

“...What other function?”

“It’s called Destructive Impulse, and it’s just as bad as it sounds. It completely destroys all the data on the device. All I have to do is press the button, and your

maid's device is nothing but a paperweight."

"Wha...?!"

"And I'm talking about more than losing a couple of photo albums. Don't forget, all your personal information and wallet contents are stored on your Academy device. When that data is blown away, everything about you vanishes with it. You'll lose your school enrollment, and your rank will drop to zero. Your maid won't even be allowed to stay on the island! ♡"

"That's a whole new level of illegal," Himeji spat, words trembling slightly. "Are you sure about this, Ms. Akizuki? Because if word gets out that you've done this, you'll be hated across the entire Academy."

"I know, but...but I can't go back now!"

Akizuki stormed up to us, went behind Himeji's back, and grabbed one of her arms. With her free hand, Akizuki made the shape of a gun and pressed her pointer finger against Himeji like a bank robber with a hostage.

"Hiroto," she said with a faint smile, "I want you to play a Game with me right now. None of these boring Trials. A real Game, with stars on the line."

"..."

"But I don't want a fair match, all right? Because I'm sick of being all goody-goody. I've sold my soul to the devil, and there's no changing that. So...if you want your maid back, you better lose. Give up a star to me and tell me I deserve to be a Seven Star, not you, okay? Then bow down to everyone and atone for what you've done. That's not asking too much, is it? It's all been a lie anyway."

Akizuki's gaze bored into me.

Ngh...!

I, meanwhile, watched her quietly, even as violent bewilderment threatened to overpower me internally. My first reaction was to assume she was joking. Akizuki had used the Trial system to force Himeji and me to fight each other. That was her primary plan. Now she was going a step further. She'd considered what we'd do if we bested her and came up with the best possible response.

This really is insane... Something's absolutely wrong.

It felt like my actions were being read suspiciously well.

The entire Fourth Ward Challenge had felt odd, and now I was sure of it. The green Unique Star stolen from Eimei School was a detector with strength relative to its owner's. Perhaps Akizuki was using that star to read my mind. It would explain how she always seemed to know where I was and how she kept making the best possible choices.

“ ... ”

That's how far the would-be Eimei champion was willing to go to crush me. Such was the strength of her grudge over losing her place. I still knew almost nothing about the real mastermind, but I didn't have much of a future as a Seven Star if I couldn't make it past Akizuki. I had taken from her. Now it was her turn to take from me.

“And I'm not gonna settle for a tie this time, either,” Akizuki sweetly whispered with a chuckle as she took out her device.

“This Game's gonna be a treasure hunt, a final battle fixed from the start. Let's get started, shall we? ♪”

Chapter 4

What I Hid

#

Akizuki challenged me to the Treasure Hunt Board Game, and as the name suggested, it'd involve finding a "treasure" that my opponent had hidden.

"Ah-ha...! Hey, can you see me? Can you hear me, too? It's cute li'l Noa! ♡"

"..."

I faced away from the projected Akizuki coming from my device, preferring to examine my surroundings. I was in one corner of Building A, where I took most of my regular classes. All other students had already left, leaving the place dim and unnervingly silent.

It was just past seven at night, about half an hour after I'd accepted the Game request from Akizuki. What had I been doing in the meantime? Akizuki had informed me that I needed "someone to serve as a partner," so I'd had to make a call. I'd also confirmed I still had a voice link with Kagaya. That was about it, basically the bare minimum. I didn't have a grasp of the Game's basic rules, much less any kind of strategy.

But that was to be expected. After all, this Game wasn't a competition for Akizuki. It was a throwaway match. One she was already guaranteed to win.

There's no winning if I want to rescue Himeji. If I could abandon her, things might be different, but that's not an option. Besides, even setting feelings aside, if word got out that I sacrificed my maid to save myself, it'd kill my reputation as a Seven Star. I'm going to lose no matter what.

I shook my head and sighed. I couldn't afford to win this Game, or lose it, or even force a draw. Akizuki was an elite-level opponent—a Six Star with a Unique Star, which made her very close to a Seven Star. And since I couldn't rely on the Company for much right now, I wasn't sure I could hold my own at all.

“...Eh-heh-heh! ♪”

Whether she was aware of it or not, Akizuki had a cunning smile back on her face.

“Isn’t this great, Hiroto? None of your friends from class are here. Too bad! I almost won by forfeit there... Hee-hee! Yep, it’s really too bad! ♡”

“...”

“Aw, ignoring me again? Ah, well... We’re short on time, so let’s begin. First, question: Is your partner hiding on floor three or below?”

“A question? What are you talking about?”

I raised an eyebrow a bit. Silence was no longer an option. I knew that this was a Game that involved finding my opponent’s hidden partner, but beyond that I had nothing to work with. Being asked a question wasn’t a part of that as far as I knew.

“Um...well, it’s a question,” Akizuki replied, leaning as though she had her device perched on a windowsill. *“It’s one of the commands available in Treasure Hunt. It lets you ask a yes-no inquiry. You can only ask one question per turn and must tell the truth when you reply. You’ll immediately lose if you lie, so be careful! ♪”*

“Mm... Okay. In that case, no.”

“Mm-hmm. Right. On to the movement phase... You have one of these per turn, too, just like the question. If you narrow down which classroom square your opponent’s partner is in, you can move there yourself. Three squares per turn is the max.”

“Three squares?”

I looked around, unsure what Akizuki meant. A moment later, I caught a glimpse of something on my device screen. I looked at it, as if sucked in, and realized it was a simple map, a grid six squares high by eight squares wide. These forty-eight squares apparently corresponded to actual classrooms inside this building. For example, I was on the fourth floor right now, in front of Class 2-J, the fifth classroom from the west side. On the screen map, a little S icon

was placed on a square four up from the bottom and five from the left. An A icon was on the left side of the ground floor.

“...All right.”

Once I’d examined all this, I gave the projected Akizuki a nod.

“So basically, every classroom is a square in this board game, and we and our partners can use the movement phase to move up to a certain amount each turn?”

“Eh-heh-heh! Exactly! ♪ You’re moving left or right for the most part, but if you’re on a square on either end with a stairway, you’re free to go up and down, too! ♡”

Akizuki had to be in a good mood if she was willing to relinquish all this extra info. To add one other detail, our partners were hiding within different classrooms, and all the real-life doors were electronically locked. Presumably, they were set not to open unless we executed some kind of command.

“Got it? You know... It’d be no fun if it ended immediately, so I’ll stretch this out a little bit for you. I’ll move one square to the right, and that’s the end of my turn! ♪”

She was egging me on and enjoying every moment of it. Her icon moved a square to the right, following her real-life movements.

With her turn finished, it was time for me to move or ask a question or whatever...but there was no need to rush this. Based on what my device indicated, I had up to ten minutes to execute my turn, so it was best to use them to their fullest to suss out the rest of the Game’s rules.

“Oh, but that was a lie, so...”

“Huh?”

“Eh-heh-heh! Don’t worry, Hiroto; I’ll explain just for you! ♡ You see, the Ability in my first slot is Double Action, which makes it my turn twice in a row. So it’s time for another question. Hey, Hiroto, is your partner hiding on floor five or above?”

“Double Action? Are you kidding me? What kind of cheat Ability is that?”

“Huh? Aw, c’mon, it’s a totally normal Ability. I just did some tinkering with it, is all! ♡ Eh-heh-heh! So what’s your answer, Hiroto? Better hurry up and give it before you’re disqualified! ♪”

“Tsk... Okay, no.”

“Oh, wow, cool! Got it! ♪ That must mean your partner’s on the fourth floor. Eh-heh-heh! I’m so cute, it must be making me luckier, too, huh?”

“...Hahhh. How would I know? If you’re going to keep praising yourself, at least save it for after you move.”

“Hmm? Oh, right, right. Okay, for my second movement, I’ll go one more square to the right, I think. I want to savor this chance to see you all irritated while I can... Eh-heh-heh! I’ll make you squirm before too long! ♡ Don’t expect me to end this quickly! ♡”

After all that, Akizuki finally ended her turns. Then, as she was waving goodbye very deliberately with both hands, her projection cut off and so did the audio. My surroundings were quiet for the first time in several minutes.

“...”

I still lacked a clear idea of what was going on, but Akizuki’s double turn made it clear how much of an advantage she had. I felt cold sweat and a nervous shudder run down my back at the same time. My frantic mind urged me to go faster.

“...Oh, right.”

Recalling something, I took out my device right after I’d put it in my back pocket. I hurriedly activated three Delays at once. These were the only Abilities I’d managed to bring to this Game. At level 2, each one wouldn’t amount to much, but they’d still extend the length of my turns somewhat. It was all I could think to install, since I’d had no time to consider the Game’s structure, but it had probably been my best available option anyway. I had a strategy meeting to conduct, after all.

“Okay...”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the remaining time go from ten minutes to

twenty. I immediately contacted my partner.

“Hello? It’s me. Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, loud and clear. Am I coming through all right? I’m talking in a really low voice so the Little Devil won’t hear me.”

“I hear you just fine. A little throaty and weirdly alluring, but...”

I joked a bit, and the ruby eyes watching me through the screen narrowed a bit.

Yes, I’d invited none other than Sarasa Saionji to serve as my partner for the Treasure Hunt Board Game. She’d sneaked into Eimei the moment her classes at Ohga were over to keep an eye on me. For a disguise, she’d donned a well-worn Eimei boys’ uniform, combining it with a masculine cap and face mask to complete her ensemble. I think her intention was to play the part of a classmate of mine who happened to still be in the building.

I lowered my voice to match Saionji’s volume. “Um... Well, first, are you okay, Saionji? Because I think you’ll be locked in there for a little while.”

“Oh, I’m fine. I don’t have to do anything, so it’s actually pretty easy. It’s a little annoying how I can’t make any noise, though. Also, it’s kind of a bit chilly, too.”

“I guess April evenings do get kind of cold. Sorry about that. I should’ve lent you my jacket.”

“...! That, um, I think I’d need some courage to put that on.”

“Why? If you’re cold, then why refuse?”

I raised an eyebrow at a slightly pink Saionji. There was no lending her my jacket right now anyway. I felt a little bad for her and Himeji, who was serving as Akizuki’s partner. They’d just have to put up with the cold for now.

“Again, thank you, Saionji. If you hadn’t come, I might’ve been dead before the Game started.”

“Mmm... It’s fine,” she replied, leaning against a desk as she turned away from me. *“I knew what I was getting into when I agreed to help, and...you know, if you lose, that’s bad for me, too.”*

“...I appreciate it,” I said, relaxing a little when I noticed how self-conscious Saionji appeared. “Losing helplessly would’ve left me completely devastated, but I couldn’t rope in some random student without knowing the Game myself.”

“Yeah, I get that. Hey, did Yuki say anything? I doubt she’d just resign herself to being a hostage without another word.”

“No, we talked...but you can probably guess what she said.”

“Really? So, like, ‘I apologize for causing you such trouble, Master, but we can resolve this easily, I simply need to leave the Academy.’ Something like that?”

“Are you psychic or something?”

From the vocabulary to the intonation, the expression, and the pauses, Saionji had completely nailed it. She smiled at my flabbergasted reaction.

“Hee-hee...! Yuki’s always been like that. She gave her all to the real Sarasa, too, just as she does with you. Her leaving is such a stupid idea, but I’m sure she means every word of it.”

“Yeah, and that’s why I can’t allow her to go through with it. If Himeji takes a bullet for me and leaves the island, I’m positive I’ll never get over it. For now, we need to get a handle on the rules. I have just under ten minutes until the end of my turn, and I need to have a perfect understanding of the rules before then. Can you help me out with that, Saionji?”

She snickered at me. “Sure,” she said. *“I’d be glad to. It won’t even take three minutes.”*

#

“So, the Treasure Hunt Board Game basically consists of tracking down your opponent’s treasure.”

I was leaning against the weirdly cold wall of the school corridor while watching the projected display coming from my device.

“Our partners are the treasures. You’re mine, and Himeji is Akizuki’s.”

“...When you describe me as a ‘treasure’ and a ‘partner,’ it sounds really weird, you know.”

“Sh-shut up. That’s what the rules say, okay? ...So the Game’s about finding the opponent’s partner before they can locate mine. If Akizuki finds you before I can find Himeji, I lose, right?”

I took my time going over this, making sure I fully understood everything. The victory conditions were simple enough. Nothing tricky so far. I used a finger to switch displays to the square grid representing this building.

“All right. This is Building A, the field of the Treasure Hunt. It’s the biggest structure on Eimei School grounds, with six floors and forty-eight rooms, eight per level. All three years of high school are taught here, with fourteen classes for each year. The rest of the rooms are things like teachers’ offices and the infirmary.”

“Mm-hmm. This is a simple six-by-eight map depicting it.”

“Got it. Player positions are displayed on the map at the start, and they’re updated in real time whenever we execute a movement. Meanwhile, the partners—you and Himeji—are hidden somewhere on this grid, placed by the players.”

“Yeah, I went to the fourth floor after you all but ordered me to.”

“All right, all right. Thank you for being so obedient, okay? Anyway, the Game starts after the partners are in place. It’s a turn-based system, and when it’s my turn, I have access to several commands.”

“You mean the question and movement phases? The Little Devil did both of those.”

Saionji turned to her right, squinting a little. Perhaps she was reading the same rule text I was, sifting through relevant sections.

“Umm, right, here... Players have access to four commands during their turn. The first, question, lets them pose a yes-no inquiry to their opponent. The other side must answer truthfully or be immediately disqualified.”

“Yeah.”

Akizuki had explained that to me. The question command forced your opponent to give you truthful answers, making it my main weapon for

narrowing down my target's position.

"I suppose the basic strategy is to start with broad inquiries as she did, then gradually close in on your target. Next up is movement. Each player can move up to three squares from their current position per turn."

"Right, you're serving as your own game piece, kinda. You're moving as if you're sitting on top of this grid here, up to three 'rooms' at a time."

"I suppose so. You can move left and right up to three squares, either toward the gymnasium to the east or the schoolyard to the west. There are stairwells on both sides, too, so you can also move up and down."

It was best to imagine it like chess, where each piece had its own restrictions. I was on a rectangular six-by-eight board, normally able to move only left or right, but I could also go up or down on the far edges. Both players were limited to up to three squares per move. It all corresponded with the real-life building and its classrooms. When I pictured it that way, movement wasn't too hard to comprehend.

"Okay, next."

I saw Saionji nod back at me, and we moved on to the other two commands. I hadn't seen these used yet, so they were total unknowns to me.

Reading from the screen carefully to ensure I got nothing wrong, I said, "It looks like the other two aren't used every single turn, unlike question and movement, but they're a lot more vital to the Game. The third command is solve. You use it to say which square you think the opponent's partner is located in. If you're right, the Game ends there. However, to use solve, you have to physically stand in front of the classroom you want to target. Knowing the right square isn't enough; you have to move to the spot and pick it. My opponent and I are each allowed to solve only three times.

"Three times, huh? So you're only allowed to get it wrong twice..."

Saionji didn't seem too thrilled about that. Having three guesses didn't strike me as all that stingy, though. Allowing two mistakes was pretty lenient.

"The real tricky command is the fourth one, escape. With it, you can freely change your partner's position during your turn. Functionally, it resets all the

knowledge your opponent learned and removes your partner from danger. But using escape requires that you sacrifice one of your solve guesses.”

“Mmm... Right. So your guesses are kind of like a card hand you can use for offense and defense, huh? You can evacuate your partner if you think your opponent knows where they are, but then you’ll lose one of your attacks as well. No wonder the Little Devil brought in Double Action. She said she was taking it easy on you to start, didn’t she? But if she wants to, she can actually move twice as fast as you. That’s a lot of pressure to keep up with. I’m willing to bet you’ll burn through your guesses first, Shinohara.”

“Yeah, probably.”

Saionji’s conjectures made perfect sense. It made me sigh a little.

With question, movement, and solve, I had several options available each turn. However, the Game was all about deducing the location of the opposing partner and getting there as fast as I could. That, and using escape so my opponent couldn’t manage it first. Escape was a great piece of defense, but it also used up one of my guesses, so I could only use it twice.

With all that in mind, the strength of Akizuki’s Double Action became abundantly clear. Getting to use question and movement twice each turn meant she could play with double the efficiency—and that wasn’t all. Thanks to the position I was in, I had to constantly consider the distance between Akizuki and Saionji. She had two turns for each one I got, and if she deduced Saionji’s position in the first one, I might not be able to invoke escape before she won.

“Yeah, Double Action is way too powerful. She’s not going easy on me at all.”

“No. I’m willing to bet it’s another illegal Ability provided by the mastermind, just like that dual-layer Emissary and Destructive Impulse. If it was being passed around in public, I would’ve heard of it.”

“Yeah, I bet...”

I shook my head a little. I suppose Akizuki felt like tricking us wasn’t necessary anymore. Everything was on the table, and she had no reason to hold back. Undoubtedly she had some other busted Abilities in her two remaining slots, things just as bad as Double Action or worse.

"Shinohara..." Looking at the screen, I saw Saionji watching me, a little distressed. *"That's about it for the rules. What are you going to do now?"*

"What do you mean?"

"Well...I don't think you can win. If you do, Yuki will have to leave the Academy, and I'd hate that. But if you lose, you'll have to leave, right? I'm...not sure how to handle this Game."

"Oh... That's what you mean."

It took me a moment to understand the question. Saionji had a good point. The Treasure Hunt Board Game was painfully unfair, designed to leave me helpless before it even started. Win or lose, I'd be ruined afterward. But unlike Clash of Triangles, this Game was designed not to allow ties. Even if it did, I didn't think it'd make much difference. As long as Himeji was a hostage, Akizuki enjoyed an absolute advantage over me. That's why I needed to conquer this Game more urgently than any I'd played before.

"..." I fixed my gaze on Saionji. "I actually think there's a way to solve that problem. I'm not certain, but I might have a plan to turn the tables."

"Mm-hmm....."

Keeping an eye on the remaining time, I ran down the strategy in my mind with her. She listened on, her face deadly serious, but once I was done, she quietly nodded.

"Hmm... Okay. Yeah, that might have a chance of working. It makes sense so far to me, at least. Like, it may very well be the only viable option. You know, I thought this when you played Kugasaki, too. When you're given the leeway to make the most unfair move possible at the last moment, you turn into this genius."

"Thanks. It's an honor to have the Empress's seal of approval. If I want this to work, we need to play the Game as usual to start, right? I should play fair and act as if I'm doing everything possible to win. That'll be my aim for the time being. I'll set everything else aside and worry about winning."

"Right," Saionji replied, arms crossed. She closed her eyes, reviewing what we'd discussed.

“Questions to work out where her partner is hidden, movement to get there, and solve to give the answer. But we can’t forget escape. Cornering your opponent once isn’t enough. Yuki will be removed at the last minute. Your number of guesses is critical. If your opponent runs out of them, it’s as good as won.”

“Yeah. So what you need the most in this Game is speed. I gotta put my opponent in check first and make Akizuki use an escape. Do that three times, and she’ll be done for. That’s the minimum I have to achieve. However, Akizuki has Double Action. I’ll never win playing the normal way.”

“...So what will you do?”

Worry colored Saionji’s voice. I gave her a shallow grin. “What do you think?” I replied, trying to sound as bold and villainous as possible. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a cheat for a cheat. After everything she’s done to me, now she’s trying to cheat her way to victory against a Seven Star—against us. Time to make that Little Devil regret it.”

#

“Eh-heh-heh... Ready to surrender yet, Hiroto? ♡”

It was shortly after Saionji and I had wrapped up our conference. I switched my device back to the Treasure Hunt Board Game just before my twenty-minute turn elapsed. Akizuki wore her usual sweet, provoking smile.

“...”

“Question time,” I flatly said, not reacting to her jab. “Is Himeji in the upper half of the building—the fourth floor or higher?”

“Huhh? What’s up with that? Borrrr-ing. This is your big chance to chat with cute little Noa. You could act a little happier about it, you know... No, not in the upper half.”

“Okay, then I’ll move three squares to the right and end my turn.”

I kept the conversation to a minimum, running through my turn at breakneck speed.

“Mmmph...”

Akizuki hemmed and hawed (as irritatingly as possible, of course). I imagine she didn't like my attitude much, but she dropped the act quickly. Her second turn was coming up, and as before, she used Double Action to rapidly narrow down where Saionji was hiding. She was still "going easy" on me movement-wise, staying on the right edge of the first floor, but she already had Saionji's location narrowed down. She could go hunting for my partner whenever she liked.

When my turn came up again...

"Well, Kagaya?"

...I contacted Kagaya, who was stationed outside of school grounds, to ask if she could intervene somehow. With her (or the Company's) cheats, I'd have a lot more firepower, which would make draining Akizuki of her guesses easier.

"Hmmmm..."

Unfortunately, Kagaya didn't sound too hopeful.

"No, I'm afraid it's not looking good. I don't think it's a security problem. Probably a defense Ability. Noa may have placed a Wide-Range Barrier or something over the building. I'm talking to you via your device's standard API, so that still works, but any nonstandard access routes are blocked. She must really be on the lookout for hacking... If I had the rest of the Company with me, that'd be one thing, but I might be stuck by myself."

"Darn... Okay."

Kagaya's voice, underlaid by the sound of a clacking keyboard, made me shrug and lean against the nearby classroom door. Akizuki was nothing if not careful with everything she did. If she'd blocked all access from outside the school, I couldn't ask the Company for any help at all. I fell silent, hand against my forehead.

"Well, look on the bright side," Kagaya continued, a bit jokingly. *"If you're really the biggest genius of your grade, Hiro—someone as hyper-intelligent as Noa—maybe it'll work out? But that's not exactly where your talents lie, huh? Too bad, too bad."*

"Hmm... Kagaya, are you saying that if we had someone as clever as Akizuki

on hand, this might work out?”

“Huh? I meant that kind of as a figure of speech...but to sum up, yeah, I guess?”

She seemed a little surprised at my follow-up.

“Before the 4WC began, I coded that Detect Devices program as one way you could avoid pursuers during the event. Real cool Ability, right? It filters the nearby devices based on whether their owners were still ‘alive.’ You guys are the only ones in that building right now. If you could use Detect Devices you could figure out Shirayuki’s location really easily.”

“Oh... Yeah, you’re right.”

“Sure am. But with that Wide-Range Barrier in effect, it won’t work. Detect Devices needs to run data through external servers to work. If a super genius was nearby, maybe they could reprogram the Ability for me so it could work stand-alone. Wide-Range Barrier only stops external interference, not internal cheating. I know the mods we’d need to make the program work, so I can relay them all to you.”

“It’s possible to reprogram the Ability without a computer?” I asked.

“Oh, Academy devices are way more powerful than top-of-the-line PCs, Hiro! Especially if you’re high-rank enough to unlock all the features. Boy, if I was in there, I could set everything up in less than two minutes. Too bad. I don’t see how that could happen. Better find someone el—”

“Well, one moment,” I cut in. “It might be possible.”

“Really...?”

I looked to the projected screen Saionji was on. “We’ve got an even bigger genius than Akizuki right here.”

“Ugh... I knew you’d say that. You really like using and abusing people, don’t you?”

“I don’t have a choice. You’re the only person I can count on here.”

“Me...? You think so? Hmm... Hee-hee!” Saionji blushed a bit for reasons only she knew, then nodded. *“Hey, Kagaya?”* she asked, sitting on a desk. *“Kagaya is*

your name, right? I kind of hate admitting to this while we're talking through his device, but I'm afraid I have some personal stuff that prevents me from giving you my ID. So we'll have to keep using this channel, okay?"

"Oh, wait, is that you, Hoodie Girl?"

"Yep. Nice to see you again. I'm not wearing a hoodie right now...but let's stop wasting time. I think I can do that reprogramming you were talking about, so can you tell me what it involves, exactly?"

"What?! Do you really mean that?"

"Of course I do. I'm not lying. I didn't mention it last night, but I'm known to be a genius on the Academy. The Little Devil couldn't hold a candle to me."

"Wow... All right, then, Hoodie Girl, I'll explain it all to you."

Kagaya must've taken a liking to Saionji's boasting, because she agreed without hesitation. *"Just know,"* she added, keeping her still-jubilant voice down, *"when it comes to things like this...I don't take prisoners. ♪"*

"The...second floor, fourth square from the right. That's where Yuki is."

After Kagaya relayed the required programming changes for Detect Devices, Saionji managed to implement them in just under ten minutes. It was close, but we wrapped up before my second turn ended. Saionji was now slumped against her chair, undoubtedly drained by Kagaya's drill sergeant-like instruction.

"Hahhh... Hahhh... I'll get you back for this later... You're crazy to think that would only take two minutes. No one could code up something so complex that quickly."

"What? No, I said two minutes if I was doing the work. No one else can manage it! But I gotta say, Hoodie Girl, you have a lot of potential! I had to spend a whole day putting Shirayuki through the easy beginner course, but you've absorbed it all in ten minutes!"

"I'll take that as a compliment... You gave her an 'easy beginner course'? You didn't even try to be that nice to me. That was relentless."

"Heh... That's just how I prefer to express my love."

"D-don't expect me to fall for that, Kagaya!" Saionji whined with anger in her

eyes. That was likely her way of recognizing Kagaya's technical intelligence, though. I certainly couldn't disagree on that front.

"...Oh, right."

My turn was almost up. It was time to get back into the Game. I tapped on my device, now much surer of myself, and returned to the main treasure hunt screen.

Akizuki greeted me with a playful *"You're so late!"* Then she leaned over to peer at me. *"I can't believe how cold you are to me, Hirotoooo... Don't get too full of yourself just because I'm going easy on you, okay? I want you to pay more attention to me! ♡"*

"I doubt that. You're just looking to tick me off."

"Huhh? No way! I want to chat some more, is all."

"Oh, really? Can I ask you something, then, Akizuki?"

"Sure! I'm not just cute, but really smart and generous, too, so ask me anything! ♡ Whether I answer is up to me, thou—"

"Not if I can help it. Question: Akizuki, did you hide Himeji in Class 1-K, four squares from the right on the second floor?"

"...?!"

I forcibly cut off the easygoing Akizuki to make an inquiry. It was the most decisive question, and I didn't care how suspicious it made me appear. Honestly, it ditched the whole spirit of the Game, but per the rules of the Game, Akizuki couldn't lie to me.

"Yes... What's going on here? Are you cheating again, Hiroto?"

"What? Come on, don't make it sound so disgraceful. I've never cheated before, and even if I did, there's no way I could now, right? Not while you've got me trapped and I don't have any decent Abilities to work with."

"No, but..."

Disbelief, unease, and disquiet danced through Akizuki's voice as she slumped. I'd actually debated whether to ask the question. It wouldn't really

give me any information, and it would put Akizuki on high alert, which was to my disadvantage. However, Akizuki was a powerful foe. Even if I'd kept quiet and marched for Class 1-K, she would've realized something was up. This tactic would hopefully throw her off her game.

“...”

I began my movement with a bold smile. By the end of it, I was on the second floor, two squares from the right. Class 1-K and Himeji were two squares from me. In chess terms, my move was akin to putting my opponent in check.

Akizuki watched silently onscreen. But after a few moments, she let out a light *“Ah-ha!”* wrenching her lips into a smile and letting out the most darling chuckle yet.

“That was a really good cheat you just did, Hiroto. All right. I’ll stop going easy on you. Question: Your partner is hiding on the fourth floor, two squares from the left. That’s the spot, right?”

“...Right.”

“Eh-heh-heh! I thought so! ♪ You’re not the only one who knows where to go now. I narrowed it down ages ago, too! Still a little far, though...but I can address that real quick!”

A dark light flickered in Akizuki’s eyes despite her smile. She was true to her word about playing seriously. The third turn saw her move six whole squares, from the right edge of the first floor to the middle of the fourth. Double Action was not to be underestimated. After all her playing around, Akizuki immediately matched my check with one of her own.

Ngh...

I scowled internally. However, Akizuki was in her own little world, putting a sly finger to her chin.

“And before I forget,” she continued, “I’m using an escape, too. I’ll use up one of my guesses to move the maid to another room...and now the Game’s reset for you! See you soon! ♡”

After a two-handed wave goodbye, she ended the call, a pretty blunt farewell

by her standards. But she had to give instructions to Himeji—the room she needed to move to and the route. Akizuki would never keep a video chat with me open while giving those orders.

“Phew...”

I let out a sigh to relax my nerves.

“Hmm...? Hey, Shinohara, do you have a moment?”

“...? What’s up?”

“I’m not getting a signal from Yuki’s device any longer. I think she’s on to us.”

“Ugh...”

Saionji’s slightly stiff voice made me roll my eyes a bit. I supposed we should have seen this coming. After I’d gotten so close to my goal without using any questions, Akizuki was right to assume something was up. It would’ve been weirder if she hadn’t taken action.

“Himeji’s device might’ve been shut down, but it’s fine. We made Akizuki use her first guess. That’s more than good enough.”

“That’s true. Pulling ahead of her by one is pretty big. But—”

“Master?”

A pure, refreshing voice cut Saionji off. I whirled around, and there, standing as calmly as could be, was Shirayuki Himeji herself.

“Ah...”

My mind stopped for a moment, unable to process this. Honestly, it wasn’t all that incredible. The escape command was in effect, so of course Himeji had left her hiding spot. She’d been close enough that I was going to reach her in the next turn, so we were bound to pass each other.

“...”

Still, this felt entirely too abrupt. I stood there, unable to form a response. Himeji held her hands at around hip level, one on top of the other, and then she lowered her head in a deep bow.

“I’m deeply sorry, Master. Ms. Akizuki ordered me to cut off all access to my

device. I don't think any further methods involving it will work from now on."

"Y-yeah, I figured. Are you okay? Is it all right to talk with me?"

"Yes. My device is still connected, so I imagine we are being overheard, but I won't say anything that will put Ms. Akizuki at a disadvantage."

She spoke just as she always did, and her silver hair swayed. I had no reason to doubt Himeji's words. I muted the audio on my call with Saionji, knowing that Akizuki could hear anything said.

"So, using escape just means...walking somewhere else, huh? Kind of a letdown."

"It appears so, yes. It would have been interesting if I warped to the next location, but apparently, not even the Academy has practical teleportation technology yet. I was also given a very troublesome, roundabout route, so as not to give you any information. *Hahhh*. I have no intention of disobeying her, but it's certainly a handful."

"Yeah, it sounds like it. Going up and down these stairways can be really tiring... Take care not to get cold after sweating, okay? It's supposed to get chilly after ten, so you might get sick since the classrooms aren't heated. *My* partner has already complained about the temperature."

"Oh, really? I appreciate your concern, Master. I don't want to spread anything, so I will be as careful as I can. By the way, Master, is my hunch about your partner correct?"

"Yeah, it's probably who you think. So don't worry. I'll finish this Game and get you out of this soon."

"Hee-hee... All right, Master. I look forward to it. If you'll excuse me, Ms. Akizuki ordered that I move quickly, so I'd best be going."

"Sure. See you later."

"Okay."

She headed for the stairs leading down, stopping only to throw me a slightly bashful look. Based on what she'd said, this was likely a feint. Judging her location based on whether I saw her go up or down was unwise.

“Phew...”

I took a breath as I thought over the Game. Glancing at the clock told me that it was a little past eight. Akizuki’s third turn wasn’t quite over yet—not until the escape command was complete—so I’d have a pretty lengthy time to work with.

I unmuted my call’s audio.

“Sorry. How’s it going, Saionji? I think you were about to say something.”

“Well, you cut me off without warning, so I don’t know how much you missed, but, um, I think we were talking about how to find Yuki. We still have two guesses left, but Detect Devices is now blocked, so what should we do next? We can’t just stall forever.”

“Mm... Yeah, you’re right.”

I nodded. As the last turn had revealed, it took full-on cheating combined with an opponent who wasn’t trying very hard at first just to maintain an even pace. We’d lose if we took the standard approach to narrowing down our target.

“The typical strategy would be to predict how Akizuki’s thinking and make guesses on where she might hide Himeji. However, that sounds pretty tough.”

“...? Why is that?”

“Simple. Akizuki’s been reading my moves throughout the entire Fourth Ward Challenge. She’s gotten in the way of everything I’ve done, and she’s seen right through each tactic. I think her actions are all based on what she believes I’ll do. And she’s using Eimei’s green Unique Star to make those calls.”

“Ohh... Right, you said it was stolen from the school. Hmm. But that makes things pretty bad for us. If she can anticipate your actions, then the green star has to possess a detection or data analysis skill, right? In the hands of someone with the Little Devil’s talents...”

“Yeah, exactly. I can’t be sure of it, but she might be reading my thoughts this very moment. Acting purely on supposition is dangerous for us. Akizuki might gain enough of an edge to dominate the Game.”

“You...might be right there,” Saionji agreed. She followed her words with a

long groan, and I could definitely relate. If Akizuki truly could read my moves ahead of time... Honestly, there was no way to beat that. Worrying about it or ditching my strategy for some other one would have me going in circles, unable to do anything.

“But...”

“*But?*” Saionji’s projected image gave me a look. “*Did you think of a way?*”

“I don’t know if I can call it that. Akizuki’s been one step ahead of me all this time, but she messed up twice. Her reactions made it obvious that she didn’t expect what happened those times. The first time was during the Trial with Himeji; the second was moments ago when you pinpointed her location.”

“*Mm... Yeah, that’s true. It’s strange. If she could fully read you, you’d think she would’ve dealt with those predicaments.*”

“Right. So I thought over what made the difference, and I think it’s because I wasn’t the only person involved. Himeji and I were trading signals during Clash of Triangles, and our Detect Devices cheat was entirely yours and Kagaya’s work.”

“*So...the Little Devil can only read your thought patterns?*”

“That’s what it looks like. And if it’s true, we can use that against her. If we trust that Akizuki has used my thoughts to stash Himeji somewhere I won’t be likely to check, then...”

“*...Then maybe it’d be easier for me to deduce, as a third party.*” There was excitement in Saionji’s voice.

This could work. Akizuki, after all, believed the disguised Saionji to be merely a passerby, unworthy of attention. She thought I was going it entirely alone. And that mistake could be her fatal error.

“Okay,” Saionji quietly said. “*Give me a moment and I’ll try working on this.*” She quickly tapped her device and brought up the Treasure Hunt Board Game map, that flat six-by-eight grid with the S icon two rows up, two columns from the right-hand edge.

“*All right. You’re here, in front of Class 1-M, on the right side of the second*

floor. You're close to the stairs, so it's easier to go up or down a level. We can immediately cross out the second floor. If Yuki went into one of those rooms, you would've seen her."

"Right, that seems fair."

"And that means the first floor is out, too."

"Oh?"

Saionji used a paint tool to briskly draw double lines over the entire first floor of the grid.

"Are you sure? I get that Himeji can't be on the second floor, but..."

"Think back to earlier. If the second floor was off the table, what question would you have asked the Little Devil? Assuming you were playing normal."

"Hmm... If I'm here at the edge of the second floor, I'd like to confirm whether I should go up or down. I think I'd ask if Himeji's on the second floor or below, or the third floor or higher—oh."

"Right. If you asked that question and Yuki was on the first floor, you could get to the same level in a single turn. You might even be able to use a solve correctly in a single turn. I really doubt the Little Devil would make a mistake like that, so let's set aside the first floor. Next up...the fourth floor is probably also out."

More thick lines were drawn across the grid. But this time, I followed the logic.

"Is it because that's where you are?"

"Exactly. I'm hiding in a fourth-floor classroom, and the Little Devil knows where I am. We know she likes to ensure everything's perfect. She'd never risk my overhearing someone's footsteps approaching. I can tell you that nobody passed by this room, at least."

"I see. In that case..."

We pressed forward, as if solving a logic puzzle. I thought things over while watching Saionji's hands.

"...So it's probably not the third floor, either. Or the left side of the fifth."

“Heh-heh! Right. The right side of the third floor’s right above you, and the left side’s directly below me. The left side of the fifth is right above me, too. The sound of someone walking might not reach across floors...but you know how deathly quiet it is in this building. Opening a door or pulling a chair out will echo no matter what you do. Even if it doesn’t, the fear that it might is ubiquitous. I honestly doubt Yuki would make a single sound, the way she carries herself, but I don’t think the Little Devil knows that. So that eliminates everything except the sixth floor and half of the fifth.”

“I see. That leaves us with twelve squares to consider... An even quarter of the rooms. That really narrows it down.” I frowned, putting a hand to my lips. *“However, that’s still too many to give us a decisive answer.”*

“No,” Saionji replied, looking right at me. *“I think there’s more squares we can eliminate. I wasn’t sure whether I should say this or not, but if you’re not going to—in other words, if this isn’t part of your thought process—I think there’s a good chance the Little Devil will go for it. Listen...if you’re trying to play this Game efficiently, you really do need to make puzzle-like calculations. You need to constantly consider how many more turns your opponent requires to reach your partner. Given that, the most valid hiding spot would be a multiple of three squares away from you, plus one. This Game incentivizes wasting as many of your opponent’s turns as possible.”*

“Uh... Okay, I think I get what you’re saying, but is thinking that far ahead typical?”

“Of course. It’s what I do, anyway. Judging by how the Little Devil has acted thus far, it’s obvious she likes to keep things efficient, too. She claims she’s playing seriously now, so I’m willing to bet I know her tactics. Putting all my suppositions together narrows down the potential hiding spots to Classes 3-E, 3-J, and 3-L.”

“...Whoa. You’re incredible.”

“What? This stuff’s obvious. I’m your partner, you know. And you’re supposed to be the best on the Academy.”

Saionji tossed that joke at me as she drew circles over three squares on the map. I know I was the one who’d suggested it, but I couldn’t help but worry

about making such a leap without asking any questions. I had to hand it to the Empress. This was astonishing. There was simply no beating her at stuff like this.

Seriously, how did someone this crazy good lose to me so easily? She can't be the type to break down because of some accident, or out of embarrassment or whatever. Maybe something else was going on with her that day...

"...? Shinohara? Hey, speak to me, Shinohara."

"Huh? Oh, um, sorry."

Saionji's puzzled voice brought me back to reality. I shook my head a bit to clear it. My thoughts had gotten away from me a little. We were already halfway through the time allotted for my third turn, and considering I needed to order an escape, we didn't have that much time.

"All right. So my question for Akizuki is clear, then. If we're wrong, we'll think up something else."

"Perfect. Hee-hee! This should be a learning experience for you. We'll learn in a moment who's better, the Empress or the Little Devil. Naturally, the answer's clear even without this test, but..."

Saionji gave me an intrepid smile, her ruby eyes shining through the screen.

"Wh...why?!"

A few minutes later, near the end of the third turn, I had gone up a floor, told Saionji to escape, then called Akizuki and issued a pointed question: "Himeji is in either 3-E, 3-J, or 3-L—is that correct?"

"Yes," came the quivering reply from Akizuki. She shook her head, tossing her brown ponytails around, her emotions getting the better of her. *"Why, why, why?! I cut off all outside interference, I made sure you couldn't pull any other tricks...and you landed it on the first try?! Why, Hiroto?!"*

She apparently didn't care that she might reveal too much as she lobbed questions at me. I winced a little. Akizuki was raging so much, she might have lunged at me if we were in the same room together. I didn't let any of that show on the outside, of course. All Akizuki saw was a smug grin.

“Why indeed? Guess I just used a method you don’t know about.”

“No. That’s impossible. I studied so hard. There’s no method on this island that I don’t know about. There can’t be. You know what that thing does, right? And you’re going around it... No, no, it should’ve caught you anyway...”

Akizuki immediately dismissed my assertion, then began mumbling to herself, clearly at her wits’ end. Her panic even caused her to talk about her previous strategy of acting all aloof and concealing things. I couldn’t blame her. It would take two turns to reach any of the squares where Himeji might be. Still, this was the second time I’d had Akizuki in check. She clearly had a tremendous advantage, yet I had gotten ahead of her twice. The Little Devil had to be extremely frustrated.

“Eh-heh... Okay. Enough.”

Suddenly, Akizuki lifted her head and spoke in a whisper. It sounded different from her usual cloying speech. It didn’t sound as though she’d lost herself in a fit of rage and panic. Call it a kind of strength, the sort backed by some kind of new resolve.

“I don’t know how,” she said with her usual twisted smile, “but...Hiroto, you’ve worked out your maid’s location based on my actions and habits and stuff, haven’t you? Yeah... That’s the only way. If you don’t have any cheats or Abilities, that’s the only approach you have left.”

“So what?”

“Eh-heh! It’s simple, Hiroto. If you’re gonna do that, then I’ll make the maid’s final hiding spot completely random. I’ll just use dice or a roulette wheel or something to decide. Eh-heh-heh... It’ll just be a test of luck between you and me! ♡”

“Random? You’re that desperate?”

“Oh, not at all! I just realized that’s the most efficient approach... So it’s my turn next, right? Let’s see. First off...”

Akizuki’s calm bubblyness was rapidly returning, and she plunged into her turn—two questions and two movements. Her queries revealed that Saionji was hidden somewhere on the bottommost two floors. My partner was safe for

now, but Double Action let Akizuki travel quickly. Danger was closing in. Chances were good that we'd both use our second guesses at nearly the same time.

"This is the worst thing that could've happened. Going totally random is the one thing we can't do anything about."

I leaned against the wall and gradually slid down to the floor. Akizuki's shocking new strategy had me rattled. Random. Making a choice that didn't incorporate any thought or strategy at all. It wasn't desperation. Akizuki was right. Given the situation, it was her most effective strategy.

"We can't use any Abilities." Saionji sighed. "And there's no cheating, either. Using the Little Devil's thought process against her was effective, but we're done if she takes the random approach. We can't even begin to search for Yuki the third go-around."

"Yeah... Man, I never expected it to blow up in our face like this."

"It's typically not an option someone would resort to. But now she's dead set on it."

"..."

I fell silent at Saionji's ominous words. Noa Akizuki, the girl who should have stood at the top of Eimei School, was beyond a menace. She employed illegal Abilities and a stolen Unique Star, and they were paying off. Everything was proceeding how she wished.

"Hey, Shinohara?"

Just as I lost myself in thought, Saionji spoke up.

"Do you think it's impossible, too?" she asked.

"What's impossible?"

"I'm asking if there's some way we can find Yuki. I can't think of anything, but maybe you... I mean, you turned it all around at the end of the Game with Kugasaki, so maybe, you know, I thought you'd do something..."

Saionji toyed with her hair for a moment, then quickly turned around. Perhaps she was embarrassed. Soon she was beet red and shouting, "F-forget

what I just said!" at me.

"What are you talking about, Saionji? If you're referring to *that*..."

"I—I told you to forget about it! Stop being mean, Shinohara! I hate you!"

"No, listen to me. If you're talking about *that* approach, I've had it ready for ages."

"...Huh?" The moment I replied, Saionji stopped moving. Her large ruby eyes blinked helplessly. *"You have it ready?"* she parroted. *"You have a way to find Yuki again?"*

"Yeah. The *third* approach, based on cheating and using her Unique Star against her. Thanks to you and Kagaya, I've managed to keep it hidden. I think it can wrap up the Game, and I've been pondering over what to do after, considering the best way to finish this."

"..."

"...? What, Saionji?"

"N-nothing... I'm just surprised, is all. I was half asking as a joke. You seriously have a plan? I'm finding it a little hard to believe."

"I wouldn't lie about this now. Especially not to you."

"Oh, I know that. You should have told me sooner, though. I feel stupid for getting so worked up."

She was glaring at me, but still heaved an exaggerated sigh of relief. "Sorry," I said with a laugh as I mentally switched gears. The aftermath was vital, but I should have concentrated on the immediate issue in the Game. I might have a way to finish this, but that didn't mean it'd necessarily turn out well. Plus, I only knew about two of Akizuki's Abilities, Double Action and Wide-Range Barrier. The third remained a mystery.

"Hfff..."

I took a deep breath to gather myself.

"Saionji, what time is it, exactly?" I asked.

"The time? Um, eight forty-two p.m. Why? Doesn't your device have a clock?"

“Yeah, but I also wanted you to be aware of it. Listen, for the next few turns, at least until we both use our second guesses and the Game’s reset, I’m going to stall for as long as possible. I’ll use every available second of my turn, and I’ll keep chatting away to make Akizuki’s turns go longer, too.”

“What does that accomplish? Are you trying to chip away at her mentally?”

“No. This will allow me to learn exactly where Himeji is.”

“Huh?”

“Assuming my signal goes through,” I added. Then I went into explaining my tactic to an utterly baffled Saionji.

#

Turn five of the Treasure Hunt Board Game was upon us.

Things were turning out largely as I’d assumed. Akizuki and I checked each other’s partners at virtually the same time (I was one turn ahead, though), and we wound up using our second escapes in succession. That meant we each had one guess left. Our backs were against the wall, yet Akizuki was completely unfazed.

“Eh-heh-heh! Wow, Hiroto! ♪ I’ve never met anyone who could keep up when I get serious. Maybe we really are meant to be a couple! ♡”

“Yeah? I haven’t heard anyone give me such an empty platitude in a long time.”

“Aww, c’mon, I mean it! No jokes or irony, okay? I really wish I could’ve met you under different circumstances... From the bottom of my heart.”

“...”

“It’s too bad we’re enemies right now.”

Akizuki looked right at me, and her lips curled into a warlike grin. I could sense the anger and hatred in that expression. There was also a weird sort of farsighted acceptance, as though she was certain of her victory.

“...Phew.”

I took my eyes off her long enough to check the clock, exhaled, and slowly

lifted my head.

“Enemies, huh?” I calmly stated. “You might be right. However, that won’t be the case for long. This will be over soon.”

“Over? Why?”

“Because I’m getting tired of this. It’s long past dusk. In the past day, I’ve been chased by a mob, lost Himeji, and been forced into this Game. I’m exhausted. I want to go home and sleep.”

“Ah-ha! ♡ Well, that’s fine. I think it’d be a lot faster if you just waited for me to win, but if you think you can end it, go right ahead.”

“Oh? And you’re okay with that?”

“...Am I okay with it? What do you mean?”

Emotions paraded across Akizuki’s face, bewilderment most of all. Meanwhile, I was trying to provoke her as much as possible with my smile.

“What do I mean?” I repeated casually. “Listen, I’m going to find Himeji this turn. Who knows how long it will take to reach her, but I’ll nail down her location in moments. So I ask again, are you okay with that?”

“This turn? Ha-ha! That’s just too funny, Hiroto. It’s simply impossible. There’s no way you can. You’d have to rely on a one-in-forty-eight shot—”

“If that’s what you think, Akizuki, then just watch me. I hope you don’t regret it!”

“...”

I took another look at the clock on my device, keeping my self-assured façade up. Watching the seconds rhythmically tick away, I thought a silent prayer for myself. *Please...please notice. Please understand. If this bet doesn’t pay off, I’ll have nothing left. Akizuki will win.*

A few seconds later, the clock struck ten.

“...Oh. Okay. Thanks.”

I gave a quick word of gratitude to the voice that came in from another projected screen, then sighed internally. It was time to give Akizuki my answer,

acting as though I'd known it all along.

"You've hidden Himeji in Class 3-G."

"..."

"Oh, and that's not my question, by the way. I know I'm right. 3-G is really close to me, isn't it? I could move one square right, go down the stairs, and there it is. I think I can solve it this turn, actually."

One potential side effect of choosing randomly, I mused to myself. I began my movement phase, but took my time. I knew I'd be able to solve this turn without Akizuki getting to respond, so I didn't have to worry about another escape. The Game's end was near.

"...Wait." After a few silent moments spent staring at her shoes, Akizuki whispered a word at me. *"At least tell me how, Hiroto. How? How do you know? I've been really frantic for a while now..."*

"Oh? You look calmer than usual to me."

"...Hiroto."

"What? It's nothing worth getting so upset over. All right, if you want to know that badly, I'll tell you. I admit my last move was a bit unfair." I grinned. "You heard Himeji and me talking when we passed each other during the first escape, right? I gave a signal to her during that chat."

"A signal? I didn't hear anything like that."

"No, you did. I don't remember the exact wording, but it was something like 'It'll get pretty cold after ten, so try to stay warm,' right? Himeji's alone in a classroom after dark, so I am genuinely worried for her, but that's not all I meant by that remark. How would she keep warm? What's the one thing in a classroom that could help with that?"

"Huh? Oh. The heater!" Akizuki mumbled in a daze. Yup, the heater. My signal to Himeji had been an instruction to turn it on once the clock hit ten.

"S-so what? The heater doesn't make that much noise..."

"True. But here at Eimei, and pretty much any other school, the HVAC system's all controlled from the teachers' office. That way, they can ensure it's

not too hot or cold. Plus—and this is important—they can keep tabs on which classroom has the AC or heat running.”

“S-so you...”

“Mm-hmm,” I replied. “My partner is hiding in the first-floor teachers’ office. At ten, I had her check to see if any AC units were running. There’s no reason for any to be on at this hour unless Himeji was kind enough to pick up on my signal and turn on the heat.”

“...”

At long last, Akizuki was speechless. First, it was hacking; next came reverse engineering her mind; now we’d reached the third method. The plan I’d hatched when Saionji complained about being a bit chilly had paid off brilliantly, much to my relief.

“Well,” I declared as I ended my movement phase in front of Class 3-G, “that’s it for this Game.” Akizuki didn’t react. Perhaps she’d finally caved, or maybe she was searching for something to exploit. I wasn’t certain. Regardless, she stood there, covering her face. I didn’t feel the need to worry about her. I had no reason to spend any more time on this Game.

Bringing my lips up to my device’s microphone, I seized the moment to say the magic words.

“Solve. Your partner, Shirayuki Himeji, is right here.”

Something unlocked the moment I said that, sending a click down the corridor. The door to Class 3-G opened itself. There was no other way to open these doors during the Game, so I guess they were programmed to react to a correct solve. Warm air, presumably from the heater humming inside the brightly lit room, caressed my skin.

“I’ve been expecting you, Master. Heh-heh. Thank you for finding me.”

Shirayuki Himeji stood there in her school uniform, her shiny silver hair bobbing in the warm breeze from the radiator.

“Yeah... Sorry I took so long, Himeji.”

I exhaled in relief when our eyes met. The solve had been a success. Despite

how disadvantaged I'd been starting out, I'd captured Akizuki's "treasure" before she got mine. Based on the Treasure Hunt Board Game rules, that meant it was all over. My victory was set in stone, and no one could complain about it.

That's what I thought, anyway.

"Ah-ha! Ah-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The sound of half-demented laughter boomed through my device. It was Akizuki, of course. I had her in checkmate. There was no way to flip this situation around, yet she laughed so hard that she looked ready to cry.

"Ha-ha! You used it! You finally used it, Hiroto! ♡ And now I win!"

"What?"

"Eh-heh-heh! ♪ I've been waiting this whole time for you to use up your third guess. Waiting for you to declare your epic triumph over me, leaving yourself totally defenseless. This whole time! Eh-heh-heh... Get ready! I'm activating the Ability Change of Fate! Your solve's been canceled!"

The moment those ominous words were spoken, the environment around me shifted. Not literally; it wasn't like the classroom transformed or Himeji vanished into thin air. However, my device's display did alter. A moment ago, it had shown a screen with the words *Solve Successful* and a related animation, but that was all gone now, along with my final guess.

"...Eh-heh-heh! ♡"

Akizuki, now back to her normal demeanor (I'm sure that depression earlier was all an act), gave me a smile so sweet that an oblivious observer might wonder if she'd fallen in love with me.

"Wasn't that just the best? That's Change of Fate, my ace in the hole. It's an EX Ability reserved for Six Stars or higher that lets me negate one of my opponent's moves. It's a super-useful emergency power that I can call upon anytime I like, so I saved it for when I was in big trouble. Aren't I just the best? ♪"

"An emergency power... So you used that to erase my solve?"

"I sure did! ♪ Eh-heh-heh... Now you can't do anything at all, huh, Hiroto? So

just sit back and watch me swing into action! ♡”

Akizuki never wasted an opportunity to antagonize me...although right now, she sounded more relieved than anything else. However, she was right. Without the ability to make guesses, the solve and escape commands were off-limits to me, so I had no means to stop Akizuki. She could conduct movements and ask me questions as much as she wanted. Worse yet, I’d already told her Saionji was in the teachers’ office.

“From now on, it’s my turn forever!”

Striking a spunky pose on my screen, Akizuki immediately performed a movement, the tapping of her sneakers sounding from across the building. The Little Devil’s footsteps almost seemed like a countdown to my doom.

However...

“Hey, Himeji?”

...I turned to Himeji while keeping an eye on Akizuki’s moves. I whispered into her ear, her smooth silver hair tickling my cheek a bit, while holding my device up so Saionji could hear as well.

“...?”

She looked puzzled at first, but as I continued explaining, her eyes went wide in astonishment and understanding.

“Huh...? B-but that... All right.”

“It’s probably the only way.”

I gave her a small nod, peering right into her eyes. But even as Himeji and I had our little secret talk, Akizuki continued her movement phase. The concept of turns no longer applied to this Game, so there were basically no restrictions on how far she could go. She proceeded along, almost skipping as she did, and in no time she arrived at the teachers’ office.

Then, with her meltingly sweet smile, she declared, *“Eh-heh-heh! Here I am! ♡”*

“No, you’re not. Quit trying to goad me.”

“Huh? What’s with you? Stop raining on my parade, Hiroto. I saw how happy you were acting a minute ago! ♡” Akizuki grinned at her camera and cleared her throat. “All right. I’ll finish this quickly, then. Solve! Hiroto’s partner is in this room! Phew! I’m feeling pretty tired, too. Sure hope I can crawl back into bed soon!”

She yawned like a puppy as she slid into the teachers’ office, the door having opened wide with her solve command. Her light footsteps bounced. She reached the center of the room, eyes darting around to scan her surroundings. Soon, she spied a girl seated at a desk on the other side of the room.

“...! ♪”

I suppose she must’ve sensed victory was in her grasp. Akizuki approached the girl as though stalking before the kill, then looked up at her with hands clasped behind her back.

“Um... Are you Hiroto’s partner? I guess we haven’t spoken before.”

“Yes, that’s right. This is the first time you’ve seen me like this, anyway. But I’ve met you several times before. Honestly, I didn’t peg you as the type to resort to breaking the law in pursuit of revenge.”

“What? What’re you trying to say, huh? You’re...a girl, right? I don’t get it. Because I sure don’t know any suspicious girls who dress as guys and wear a cap and mask to hide their faces.”

“Oh, I’m not trying to hide anything. This is fashion. If you think it’s suspicious, that says more about you than me.”

“You...!”

The girl at the desk, speaking in a low, chiding tone, glared back at Akizuki. She raised an arm and removed her cap by the brim.

“...Huh?”

That little motion was all it took for that hidden ball of red hair to come tumbling down to her waist like magic, a breathtakingly fast transformation. She followed it up by pulling the mask off her mouth while her strong-willed ruby eyes trained themselves on Akizuki.

“Well?” she asked, stifling a laugh. “Do you remember now?”

“The Empress... Sarasa Saionji?! Wh-why are you here?!”

“Why? Oh, no major reason. I happened to be nearby, and it looked like that Seven Star was in trouble, so I thought I’d butt in and have some fun. I guess you don’t have what it takes to beat him, huh? What will it take to find someone who can finally stop that guy?”

“I don’t have what it takes...? What are you saying? I won. I beat the Seven Star. I reached out for some illegal Abilities, I took the star from Hiroto, and now I’m the new leader of the Academy—”

“Are you serious? Because if you are, I honestly feel a little bad for you.”

“Bad?”

“Yeah. You used illicit means to take down Hiroto Shinohara, right? Heh-heh! No wonder it turned out like this. He plays really mean, you know. Someone unaccustomed to cheating can’t beat him at his own game.”

“...”

A pregnant pause.

“Well, you did win the Game. There’s no doubting that, and I’m certainly not going to say otherwise. However, I think there might be some confusion about who you beat.”

Saionji looked at me through her screen. Akizuki, face white in fear, joined her.

“...”

My lips quirked up on one side in a half grin.

“You heard her, Akizuki. Just like that Six Star heiress said, you’re definitely the winner of the Treasure Hunt Board Game. Unfortunately, I’m not the loser.”

“You’re...not...? But that’s—”

“Oh, it’s very possible, trust me. I get the idea this sort of thing is really rare, so not even a knowledgeable player like you expected it. After all, it was only available in a single store run as a hobby. It’s not floating around the big

markets or the internet.”

“...?”

“Let me ask you, Akizuki, have you heard of an Ability called Pinch Hitter?”

And there it was.

Winning and losing this Game had both led to doomed futures. Himeji had been taken hostage and there was no way for me to engineer a draw. I’d needed to find a way past this roadblock, and so my attention had fallen to this little trick, the special Ability, handcrafted by the owner of that janky shop Saionji had dragged me to. The one I’d purchased for Himeji as a gift. Pinch Hitter could be activated by someone outside a Game in progress, letting the user join the Game in place of the target player (if they gave permission). It was an extremely uncommon sort of substitution Ability, and while I had come into the Game with nothing but Delays in my Ability slots, there had been no need for me to equip Pinch Hitter.

I’d used it to switch places with Himeji. In other words, one of the players had changed from Hiroto Shinohara to Shirayuki Himeji. That swap was already set in stone, so Akizuki’s opponent was now Himeji instead of me. I hadn’t lost to anyone, and a Six Star like Akizuki wouldn’t gain anything from beating a Four Star like Himeji.

Of course, if Pinch Hitter were all I had, it wouldn’t amount to much. Akizuki had a huge advantage over me so long as Himeji remained her hostage. I’d still be making my way down the highway to my doom.

“It’s all thanks to you, Akizuki. As careful as you are, you added certain extra elements to this Game that made this move a lot more important than it seems.”

I smiled with Himeji beside me, making sure my face was in full view of the camera. I could feel all the pieces clicking into place in my mind.

“Listen,” I said, spelling it out so I could be doubly sure. “I just switched places with Himeji, so you beat her, not me. Let me say that one more time—you beat Himeji. Whether you wanted to or not.”

“Huh? Ah!”

“Finally noticed? That’s right. Emissary and Destructive Impulse, the dual-layer Ability you put in Himeji’s device, was set up to transfer to the winner’s device once Himeji lost, right? It just went from Himeji’s device to yours. You can’t treat her as a hostage any longer. I didn’t lose the Game, and best of all, that cursed Ability’s infected *your* device now. Well? What do you think? Because personally, I don’t think I could ask for a more perfect result.”

I presented the cold, hard truth as punishingly as I could. There was no way out for Akizuki. The Treasure Hunt Board Game was over.

“...!”

After hearing me out, Akizuki closed her eyes, resigned to her fate. I watched through my device’s projection as she quietly collapsed to the floor.

#

“So, ready to get into the nitty-gritty now, Akizuki?”

It was midnight, and I was in the teachers’ office. The room was illuminated by the bare minimum of light, making for a dim, eerie atmosphere. I sat across from Akizuki. I had chosen to go down to the teachers’ office mainly because Akizuki refused to budge, and talking to her through my device was starting to get old. We were the only two in the room. I’d asked the others to stay outside to give them a chance to rest. Plus, ganging up on an emotionally distraught Akizuki didn’t seem right.

“...”

Akizuki hung off a nearby chair, her small body curled up. She wasn’t on her knees anymore, but her eyes were downcast, and her right hand trembled atop her left. Her bangs concealed her face, but through them I could catch glimpses of fear and despair as well as a twinge of resignation. Despite it all, she kept an incongruous grin pasted on her face.

“Do I have to talk...? Eh-heh-heh! I don’t really want to, so...”

“It’s fine if you don’t. But I’ve got some business of my own to take care of, you know. If you refuse to talk, then I’ll keep investigating and hounding you.”

“Eh-heh! You sure are passionate about this, Hiroto. I love how dedicated you are to me... But maybe I should talk. This might be my last chance.”

...Her last chance?

That phrase stuck with me. Akizuki stretched, a deliberate gesture of bravado. Maybe that helped her reset a bit, because she faced me in her seat, looking a little more serious than before.

“You know, Hiroto... I’m going to talk about myself. A lot of it might not interest you, but it’s really important to me. It’s stuff I’ve never told anyone before now.”

“Oh? Okay.”

After all that confidence, this sudden dejection threw me off somewhat. Still, I nodded in acceptance. I was the one making her talk, so of course I wanted to hear anything she was willing to share.

Akizuki took a deep breath to steel her resolve and placed her linked hands on her lap.

“Um... I think you know this, but I’m a pretty smart girl. I took this ‘educational development test’ thing before first grade and received one of the best scores in history. That’s why I was recruited to join one of the primary school programs here on the Academy.”

“That sounds like more than pretty smart, but okay.”

“Eh-heh-heh! Thank you, Hiroto. Having you say that to me feels kinda weird, but I’m glad for it.”

That was, perhaps, the most understated reaction I had ever seen from Akizuki.

“The grade schools on this island are insane. There are a lot of good students at the high school level, but in the younger grades, it’s really nothing but future leaders of society. Not in terms of ability or talent or whatever. It’s more like families, bloodlines... Heiresses, the sons of CEOs—nothing but *those* kinds of people. Nobility, I guess? And they see the world differently. Common sense doesn’t work the same for them. They possess a completely different worldview. So someone from a normal background like me... There was no way I could blend in with them. I carried an inferiority complex around all the time.”

“Inferiority complex?”

“Yeah. Eh-heh-heh... Maybe it’s tough for a gifted guy like you to understand. When all these amazing people surround you, it sucks when you’re *not* so amazing. You start to think you’re no good. It’s not like I hated life. Nobody bullied me. I got along really well with everyone, actually. However, all I saw daily were these people in a different world, and I felt like I was the only one with no talent or value. But blaming everyone else just made me feel even worse. All I could do was bottle it up. I only ever felt less than.”

Akizuki’s expression remained dark as she spoke of her past, mixing in a dry laugh now and then. I could sense the great pain behind her words. Recalling those memories had to be painful, yet she drummed up the will to go on in her soft voice.

“But...but I wanted to try really hard. I knew how great everyone was and that I was only normal. Eventually, I thought that if I stopped being normal, if I became this really great girl, maybe I could catch up to everyone else. Maybe I could be together with them. So I studied as hard as I could. My classes, the Academy system, Games and Abilities... By the time I reached high school, I knew more about all of that than anyone else. After all, once you gamble stars on a Game, your name and money stop mattering. It’s a pure battle of power. I thought that people would learn to accept me that way. Maybe I could become something special.”

“I don’t think you were wrong.”

“I wasn’t. And thanks to all that effort, I made it into the top class at Eimei in my first high school year. I kept building up my stars and reached five last year... Everyone in my class said I’d be the next school champion. They thought I’d win the 4WC and represent the school. So I made that my goal. I needed to prove myself, you know? To make that inferiority complex go away...as a reward for all the hard work I put in. I wanted people to accept me. I wanted to be special.”

She was sticking to the past tense the whole time. I was starting to understand why.

“But...”

Akizuki looked up at me, her tearful smile all but confirming my suspicion.

“You ruined all of that, Hiroto.”

“...”

“...You know that, don’t you? Because in the end, no matter how hard I try, I’m still just an average girl. I’m no genius. Everything I’ve taken such pains to build up was instantly blown away by this hurricane that blew in from outside the island.”

Akizuki kept her voice even as she stated the truth flatly. I’d caught hints of her motives before our Game. However, they apparently ran deeper than I’d suspected.

“That’s why I hated you,” she continued, an assortment of emotions in her expression. “I hated the man who took so much of everything from me. ‘That’s mine. Stop taking it.’ My mind was so full of fear and despair. I kept telling myself I’m cute, I’m capable, I’m this really great girl, but I couldn’t smile at all. Nothing seemed to matter to me anymore. But you know what? For the *normal* Noa, that’s all it would be. I’m used to things not going right, and I keep screwing up, so no matter how hard it gets, I can deal with it. I’d never try to seek revenge. But...”

“But then you caught the attention of that ‘devil,’ right?”

“Heh... Yeah, exactly. They’re a lot scarier than a devil, honestly. It was around two weeks ago. I was out walking at night, and all of a sudden, I got a message from an unlisted account... It was creepy, yet I answered it. I felt like I had to.”

Akizuki paused. “Maybe that was a mistake,” she remarked, half-jokingly. She looked ready to cry, but she still managed to keep her voice firm.

“The devil who reached out to me was a man named Mikado Kurahashi, provost of the Seijo School in the Twelfth Ward. He’s also the chief superintendent of the ward, so he holds absolute power over there. He’s young, too, and polite, gentle, and talented... Just an amazing guy. Everybody looks up to him.”

“...But not you?”

“Well...I don’t know. It’s hard to say at this point.”

Akizuki shook her head, forcing a smile. I kept my eyes on her as I thought this over. Mikado Kurahashi, the mastermind interfering with the Fourth Ward Challenge. I had no idea how, but he’d contacted Akizuki when she was most vulnerable. And whether it was meant as a threat or an attempt at brainwashing, this was what Akizuki claimed he’d told her.

Do you hate him?

Do you hate Hiroto Shinohara, the man who trampled all over your hard work? Do you hate Eimei for abandoning you and allowing him to do that? Do you hate him so much for making you so powerless?

Well, I’ve got some good news. Between you and me, something’s definitely going on with Hiroto Shinohara. Normally, a kid can’t start at Four Star or higher when they come in, unless they pull a lot of strings. According to the data, he’s a Seven Star, so I can’t challenge him directly, but it’s hard to believe he’s completely legitimate. There might be a far-reaching conspiracy. What do you think? Hate him even more now, don’t you? Wanna take him down?

Then let’s talk business.

It’s simple, really. We’ll take advantage of the Fourth Ward Challenge, a time when thousands of kids across Eimei School will be fighting each other, and we’ll have you take a star from Shinohara. Huh? Oh, don’t give me that crap now. Like I said, Hiroto Shinohara’s clearly cheating. It’s only fitting that someone takes him down, y’know? Am I wrong?

And if you can pull that off, that’ll demote Shinohara and make you the new Seven Star. Once you earn that last star, I’ll have you ditch Eimei and join us here at Seijo, okay? That’ll earn me a new first-class talent, and you’ll get to be on top and get your revenge against Shinohara and Eimei. It’s almost hilarious how good a deal this is for you.

Consider it carefully, Little Devil. This is a big chance for you. And you’re far from the only person I could ask, you know. Only the Seven Star is truly unique on the Academy, and I’ve got lots of other Six Stars I could reach out to. But I went to you instead, okay? That’s all I’m saying.

If you can, try to reply to me by midnight tomorrow. I think you know what's best for you.

“ ... ”

“...Heh. So yeah, there's your answer, Hiroto.”

Akizuki slumped back in her chair, staring at the ceiling while she spoke.

“The devil approached me, and I took his offer. Lie, cheat, do whatever it takes to seize a star from you. Then all my dreams would come true. I'd typically never take that offer. I think I was scared. All my hard work got destroyed before it could be rewarded, and I had no idea what to do. I felt like no matter what I did, I'd always be average and never catch up to those born special. Then I had this big chance out of nowhere...so no matter how suspicious I knew it was, I didn't have any choice but to agree.

“But...but once I did, there was no more turning back. Once things started moving, I became a villain, and I couldn't go back. I was the one doing bad things, so I couldn't talk to anyone about it. I had to beat you, and I went so far as to take your maid hostage. However, I still couldn't win.”

“You didn't try to resist this Kurahashi guy?”

“Resist...? Oh, no way,” she said mockingly, quietly shaking her head. “You don't get it, Hiroto. There's no way I could ever take that man on. He's got much more power, experience, talent, *everything*. And he's really sly, too. Even if I accuse him, no one will turn up evidence of his involvement. I'm sure I'll be framed to look like I acted alone.”

“ ... ”

“It's fine,” Akizuki said while I was still processing all this. “Forget about me. I told you what happened and why I did it. I don't have anything else for you now. It was my fault for trying to cheat my way to victory in the first place. My fault for being normal and having these dreams of being anything else. Heh-heh! Don't worry, okay? You don't need to get payback. I'm in for something awful anyway. I didn't uphold my part of the deal, so now I have to answer to him. I'll be at his mercy...forever, probably. Eh-heh-heh! This was my last chance. Getting to see you, coming to this school... Today's probably the last

day for it all.”

“...”

“I honestly regret trying to hurt your maid. That’s all I’m truly sorry for.”

Akizuki bowed deeply, using a sleeve to wipe the tears from her eyes. She really did want make amends on that front, at least. I could tell she was about to disappear from my life forever.

What? Don’t give me that shit.

Listening to Akizuki’s confession filled me with irritation.

To sum up, Mikado Kurahashi was the mastermind behind all of this, and Akizuki was his pawn. He’d presented her with a tantalizing offer when she was at the end of her rope. Akizuki fell for the lure and then had no choice but to press forward. Her only option was to take a star from me, no matter what it took. She couldn’t afford to fail. That look of relief I’d sensed after she activated Change of Fate told the whole story.

That was all fine. It’s what came after that was the problem.

“Why do you think you can give up?”

“Huh?”

“‘Leave me alone’? ‘This is the last time you’ll see me’? Can you stop pretending to be the heroine of some tragic opera, Akizuki? Don’t drag me into this and assume you can dictate how it’s going to end. I don’t care if you were threatened or brainwashed, but don’t just quit.”

“B-but I can’t do anything else! Nobody’s going to help me. There’s no one out there who could ever beat that devil...”

“No? Well, maybe that’s just because you were too busy looking at the floor to notice.”

“Huh?”

I attempted to strike as heroic a figure as possible, hoping it might help Akizuki compose herself. Then I reached out to her and brushed her bangs away while tipping her head up so she would look at me. Tears filled her eyes. There

was nothing but despair in her expression. However, after a moment, there was a sliver of confusion as well.

“Hiroto?”

I stared into her eyes, smiling boldly. “Did you forget? I’m the strongest on the Academy. Provost of the Twelfth Ward or not, no weakling like that stands a chance. He’s not even worth fighting. My victory’s been guaranteed from the start. So shut up and let me rescue you.”

“B-but there’s no way...”

“Sure there is. I’ll want your help to end the 4WC the way it needs to, though.”

The events that followed were all pretty one-sided.

After those wholly fabricated claims of strength earned me Akizuki’s cooperation, I marched straight over to Provost Ichinose with a befuddled Akizuki in tow. There we went over everything that had happened, including Himeji’s capture. We also informed the provost that Mikado Kurahashi from the Twelfth Ward was the mastermind supporting Akizuki.

“Oh... Him, huh? Yeah, he acts all mild mannered, but he’s a real trickster. It’s disgusting how well that dictator controls people with his words. Well, that makes things complicated. He’s not the sort of guy to fall from one student’s testimony.”

The provost winced at us. So I decided to throw a certain proposal her way, a method for getting back at the slippery, ever-so-careful devil. A critical hit of sorts that could end all of this in one fell swoop. Provost Ichinose listened intently. She smiled when I finished.

“In that case, why stop there? How about we add some more flash?”

The next day, as we’d predicted, Mikado Kurahashi called Akizuki over to see him. The location: The top floor of a building protected by multiple layers of security situated in a corner of the Academy’s Twelfth Ward. In a hidden room typically never accessed without permission, Kurahashi unloaded on Akizuki.

“Ugh... I’m completely disappointed in you, Little Devil. What the hell are you

doing...? You're a Six Star, aren't you? The future champion of Eimei? So why can't you eliminate a dirty cheater or two for me, huh? Do you realize how much I've lost thanks to you? It costs money to develop and troubleshoot illegal Abilities, you know... And that's not counting the risks I take. Yet you've given me nothing in return?

"This is business, you understand. I told you that at the beginning, didn't I? You got your end of the bargain, and now you've got to put up with mine. From now on, you're mine.

"That's right. Think of it as joining my private army. I give you orders, and you faithfully carry them out. My position prevents me from making attention-grabbing moves, so you'll take all the dangerous dirty work for me. The best pawn I could ever hope for, and an easily disposable one.

"Hey, say something, you little brat. Stop being quiet and just speak already. Say you'll serve me."

Kurahashi wove a web of threats to break Akizuki's heart and make her subservient to him. Akizuki was seated on his sofa, staring at the floor, but her fear drove her to make a run for the door. She didn't get far before Kurahashi grabbed her. He forced her against the wall.

The light faded from Akizuki's eyes as she realized there was no escape. "Yes," she said, lightly nodding as despair filled her. "I...am your..."

That was when I stormed into the room.

A deafening explosion sounded throughout the building, blowing the door off its hinges. Once it had been a heavy thing that only Kurahashi could operate, but now it was a crumpled mass on the floor. That, of course, was thanks to the Company, but the shocked Kurahashi had no way of knowing that.

Akizuki, holding back her fear, flashed an adorable, cunning grin.

"Eh-heh! ♪ What did you say? Be your slave? Did you really think I'd ever agree? Like, wow, way to scare me! ♪ You sure love manipulating people, don't ya? ♡ What? Was I acting? Oh, come on! Of course I was. I may not look it, but I've spent my life deceiving myself since elementary school. Fooling you is a piece of cake by comparison! ♡"

That's right. Akizuki had been acting the whole time, playing the role of a loser who had abandoned all hope. All the while, she'd been contributing to our counterattack. The Emissary and Destructive Impulse Ability on her device included video and audio monitoring, so all of us on the outside had gotten to see the real Kurahashi.

"Ah...but that's not all, either."

I smiled a bit after rapidly revealing everything. All that remained was the lead-up to the final scene. My initial proposal had been to use the evidence we gathered to keep Kurahashi's lips sealed for us—a relatively mild approach. But Provost Ichinose had no intention of keeping things mild.

"Hello, hello! Libra on the scene! Hee-hee! Just as you requested, Shinohara, that audio feed was broadcast across the island on LNN! The camera's rolling right now, too!"

Libra, ever willing to stand up to the rich, powerful, and well connected, was here. To sum up, our provost had exposed Kurahashi's abuse via the most influential media outlet on the island. Naturally, LNN's feed showed me breaking in and rescuing Akizuki as well.

"You're live...?! Libra?! Y-you... Hiroto Shinohara!!"

"Ha! What? Quit acting like such a villain, Kurahashi. Smile a little! You got thousands of people watching you right now."

I sneered at him, trying to look as commanding as possible. Meanwhile, Kurahashi cursed me. That, too, was being broadcast, spread across social media at the speed of light. This was a huge story. Instantly, Twelfth Ward Superintendent Mikado Kurahashi's reputation was ruined. Rumors were already circulating about a replacement.

"Game, set, and match."

It was a perfect, utterly unassailable victory.

###

Now came the seventh and final day of the Fourth Ward Challenge. The round-robin tournament marking the end of the event was about to begin in Eimei School's largest lecture hall.

Since anyone could challenge anyone else during the 4WC, there weren't any rankings. There was a decent chance the event would end with multiple people surviving. Thus, any survivors at the end of the sixth day had to battle to determine a champion. It had long been a tradition at Eimei, but had only been codified into the rules recently.

If one participant remained before the final day, this event would be replaced with an award ceremony. Given the nature of the rules, the number of remaining players at the end could vary wildly from year to year. This time around, though, the situation was nothing if not straightforward.

"Um... Right, good morning, everyone."

The dark-haired beauty at the lectern scanned the hall. She looked a little sleepy.

"I'm Ichinose, your provost. As you may have heard, we had some interesting events yesterday. And after drinking until dawn, I'm just a little tired. Hopefully, you can all laugh it off as a grown-up being irresponsible and paying for it. As our emcee just said, we're about to kick off the round-robin tournament that marks the final stage of the Fourth Ward Challenge. Undoubtedly, everyone's been keeping up with the news on LNN and the forums, but in case you're unaware, we have two survivors left."

The provost took a moment to face me and the girl next to me on the stage. Her speech was slow and stilted, but one look at those eyes past her glasses told me she was thoroughly enjoying this.

"The first is Hiroto Shinohara, the strongest on the Academy. The boy who's been causing upsets since the beginning of the month. He's been pursued by huge crowds of players, much like we assumed, but it'd be an unthinkable embarrassment if the Seven Star didn't make it this far. He's done his duty, you could say."

"What a malicious way to describe it. I mean, I'll take the compliment, but..."

"It's the best praise I could ever give you. You should revel in it. Anyway, our second player is a Six Star from Class 3-A who's finished in the top echelon of the 4WC for three years in a row. It's the Little Devil, Noa Akizuki."

“Mm...”

Akizuki nodded a little, barely acknowledging the provost’s introduction. There was no sign of her usual bubbly, cunning demeanor, which confused the provost a bit, but she quickly moved on.

“These two competitors will compete for the final bout of the 4WC. Both of them have already won spots on Eimei’s Interward League team, but it wouldn’t be right if we didn’t crown a school champion, now would it? Besides, there’s nothing I like more than a party, and a battle between a Six and Seven Star is one of the biggest parties of all. I’m expecting a clean fight from both of you—”

“Ah... Excuse me!!”

Suddenly, a nervous interjection filled the hall, interrupting the provost just as she was getting into her groove and psyching up the crowd. It certainly didn’t come from me. No, it was Akizuki.

“Um... Can I have a moment, Provost?”

“Of course you may. I always welcome curious minds. Are you asking about my glasses, perhaps? Whether they’re real or not, or if they’re packed with all kinds of features?”

“Um, when you describe them like that, I am a bit curious, but no. There’s something I wish to say before we continue. Um... I have no intention of fighting Hiroto.”

“Hmm? What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what I said. I will not participate in today’s final battle... Or I guess it’d be easier to say that I want to withdraw from the 4WC.”

She was hesitant at first, but when Akizuki made herself clear, the several thousand students in the audience erupted into confused discussion. That was to be expected. Akizuki had a perfect 4WC record so far, yet she was bowing out at the last moment. It made no sense. Not to toot my own horn, but a free shot at a Seven Star was a rare, precious opportunity. I couldn’t blame the crowd for having questions.

“ ... ”

Provost Ichinose stared back at Akizuki for a moment. Eventually, she quietly adjusted her glasses, and when she spoke, she was all business.

“May I ask for a reason? There’s nothing in the rules forbidding this, but the 4WC is one of Eimei School’s hallmark events. Dropping out will cause big problems for me.”

“I-I’m sorry...but I won’t change my mind.” Akizuki apologetically shook her head. She gave me a brief smile before turning and approaching the front of the stage. There, beneath the heat of the spotlight, she bowed deeply.

“I’m really sorry!!!”

Akizuki screamed loud enough to silence the entire audience. Her brown ponytails swayed as she bent over almost too deeply for it to be called a bow. She held that pose for ten seconds. When she straightened up, there was powerful resolve in her eyes.

“I think a lot of you saw yesterday’s live stream, but maybe some of you don’t know, so I’ll explain everything. To tell you the truth...I cheated during the 4WC. I wanted to be someone special, no matter the cost, and I used some really underhanded methods to try and take a star from Hiroto. While all of you were playing fair, I schemed to do all kinds of horrible things. For that...I’m truly sorry!”

Akizuki bowed again. She seemed a little stiffer than usual, but there was no wavering or hesitation. I’m sure she’d spent the whole night preparing herself emotionally.

“Eh-heh-heh...” She even managed to smile a bit. “But in the end, Hiroto’s so good that none of my plans worked. Still, cheating is cheating, so I really don’t think I deserve to stand here. I need to accept my punishment... So as of now, I hereby—”

“Hold it, Akizuki.”

Before she could speak the fateful words, I cut her off with a curt phrase. I didn’t shout, but I knew Akizuki heard because I saw her back shiver slightly.

“...What, Hiroto? I’m just about done here.”

“I stopped you because I can’t let you finish. Look, there’s no need for you to drop out, okay?”

“Huh...?”

Akizuki faced me, the surprise plain in her expression. Her mouth hung open for a few moments before she vigorously shook her head.

“Wh-what are you talking about, Hiroto? Of course I need to. I did a bad thing, and I have to take responsibility.”

“Punishment for those in the wrong is fine. But I’m not sure you’ve done anything bad. You were caught in a moment of vulnerability and forced to do another’s bidding. Kurahashi’s the bad guy here, and like you said, I ultimately wasn’t affected. There’s nothing for you to atone for.”

“Y-yeah, he’s the one who put me up to it, but...I accepted. Even if you say it’s okay, Hiroto, no one else will let it slide!”

“You don’t think so? Well, what if they do?”

“Huh?”

“If everyone agrees that you’re okay, then you won’t withdraw from the 4WC. Is that what you’re saying?”

“I...maybe. But that’s just...”

Akizuki nodded dispiritedly. Clearly, I was making her falter a bit. I smiled.

“Well, great.” I tried to sound all self-important. “I prepared this whole thing, and I was afraid it might go to waste.”

Thrusting a hand into my pocket, I took out my device. With a couple of taps, I projected a screen depicting a set of data. Akizuki gave it a puzzled look, not recognizing it at first. However, her eyes soon widened in understanding. “Ah... Is this...?”

“That’s right. It’s the results of the viewer poll that went live after Libra’s stream yesterday. It has a few questions, but I edited out the ones that didn’t require an Eimei ID to answer. ‘Who do you think is at fault for this?’ ‘How should Noa Akizuki be dealt with?’ And so on. Do you see the results here? Over 99.5 percent of the people here don’t think you did anything wrong.”

“B-but that was right after they saw *that* video—”

“You think some of them were sympathy votes? Yeah, I admit that’s possible...but take a closer look. What matters more is the number of people who responded.”

“The number... Eight thousand, nine hundred and twenty-three?”

Akizuki timidly read the number while staring at the projection. Eight thousand, nine hundred and twenty-three votes was a crazy number. There were around nine thousand high schoolers at Eimei and participants in the 4WC. Nearly all of them had watched that stream to the end. And after they did, they’d almost unanimously sided with her.

“Ha!” After checking to make sure Akizuki understood, I gave a little laugh. “Well? Are you still going to claim that you’re not special? That nobody accepts you? No matter how much influence Libra has, everyone watched yesterday because they saw ‘Noa Akizuki’ trending on STOC. You can look at the archives later if you want. It was really crazy. All the top-level champions from every ward posted about you, praising, sympathizing, acknowledging you as a rival. All of them were furious with Kurahashi. Do you still think no one’s paying attention to you? Even the Empress is sticking up for you.”

“You’re kidding...”

“You think I could lie about that? Look, Akizuki. All you did was get a little too worked up. You’ve held on to those feelings of inferiority for so long that you lost sight of your surroundings. Honestly, you’ve been special for a long time now—and you did it alone. It wasn’t anything Kurahashi’s power granted you.”

“...!”

Akizuki’s eyes seemed a size larger now. Large teardrops made it clear that she couldn’t hold out any longer. She covered her eyes with her sleeves upon remembering how many people were watching, yet the tears wouldn’t stop. The students sitting up front cheered for her, which only added to the waterworks.

I took a step forward, eyes fixed on Akizuki.

“So...I have a proposal for you.”

Akizuki raised her head. The crowd, perhaps sensing something, buzzed with anticipation.

“The winner of the Fourth Ward Challenge—the champion of this school—is you, Akizuki.”

“...What?”

““““Huh?””””

My proclamation was greeted with bemusement from Akizuki and the audience. Even the provost stared at me from her lectern, as if to say, “What the hell are you talking about?” But I ignored all their reactions.

“I’m withdrawing from this event, not you. I’m sorry to drop this on you after getting you worked up, but I have no intention of holding a Trial with you.”

“Ah... Uh, why not? Don’t you want to be champion?”

“Not really. I wasn’t dodging all those Trials because I didn’t want to lose. It was just a pain to deal with all those opponents. I have no intention of laughing off the tenacity you showed against me, but really, I just can’t get motivated for the 4WC. I never could. Plus—”

“Plus?”

“I’m already the strongest on the Academy, aren’t I? I’m not gonna spend my time beholden to little things like being Eimei’s champion. So I’ll let you have the title instead.”

“...! B-but...!”

“Sorry, objection overruled. Besides, I just pressed the button.”

I held up my device as I quietly revealed that fact, grinning as the audience went into a frenzy.

“My apologies to anyone who thought I’d win this, but think about it a little, won’t you? Being champion means representing the school on the national stage. There are obligations to participate in various other events and to work with the provost and student council president on administrative responsibilities. That all sounds boring to me. No way I could survive that. I don’t mind fighting in the Interward League, but being on top comes with way

too much red tape. So if someone's weird enough to desire all those tasks, I'll gladly let them take them. Don't think badly of me for pushing the work on you."

"..."

I walked up to the dazed Akizuki and offered my prewritten excuse as arrogantly as possible. Once I was within arm's length of her, I cut my mic and spoke softly, so only she would hear.

"Now you're special in every definition of the term."

"Ah!" Akizuki yelped. She stayed silent for half a minute before she nodded and faced the crowd.

"All right... All right. Fine. In that case, I'm the champion of Eimei School. I'll become a perfect champion, one who will never lose to Hiroto in a fair competition. And I'll make sure none of you are disappointed for choosing me. So...so follow me with everything you've got, people!"

""""Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!!""""

The hall erupted into its greatest cheer of the day as Akizuki held her hand high.

Live Look-In: Libra's official channel on the night of the sixth day

- >Oh, something's starting? Rare for Libra to stream without warning
- >It's all dark. Scary... Oh, I hear something
- >I thought I was imagining it, but yeah, I hear it. Someone shouting?
- >Some full-of-himself boss, it sounds like. Gross haha... Actually it's not funny at all, what's up?
- >Is this a hidden camera? Is this legal?
- >I feel like I've heard this voice before... Who is it?
- >?!?! They blew the door away hahahaha
- >Someone's coming! Isn't that Shinohara?!
- >Wha?! What is this?! Some kinda prank?!
- >Oh, who's this guy? I've seen him before.
- >?! That's our provost! Wait, he was the one saying all that?
- >I know that girl he's grabbing. The Little Devil from Eimei
- >Ahhhhhhhhh you're right! Noa!
- >What the hell, Shinohara? Why're you reaching out for my Noa?!
- >Bad news, Twelfth Ward, turns out Provost Mikado Kurahashi is a total asshole
- >No way... I feel so bad for Noa. Kurahashi needs to go away
- >I came here after I saw all the trending terms on STOC. This is awful
- >I hate Shinohara, but I gotta hand it to him for saving the Little Devil. Also, props to Libra for being there
- >No way he can talk his way out of this. Kurahashi's so done for

Epilogue

Closure and Opening

#

Update: 4WC Over!

The Fourth Ward Challenge, the student event held by Eimei School, came to a raucous close this afternoon. Despite all expectations, the winner wasn't Hiroto Shinohara, the strongest on the Academy, but Noa Akizuki, the Little Devil Six Star and subject of intense gossip.

However, this wasn't because Shinohara choked. During the 4WC, he exposed illegal dealings in another ward, retaliated with swift punishment, and even gave up his spot as champion to Akizuki. Yet after the dust has settled, he remains an untouchable figure looming high above the clouds.

We'll continue with a look back at the 4WC and the many competitors who made it truly special, including the epic battle between two Six Stars on the third day and the fine performance from Shirayuki Himeji, the buzzworthy maid and new transfer to Eimei School.

"...Phew. Okay, if you'll excuse me."

I closed the ornate doors in front of me.

The seven-day-long Fourth Ward Challenge concluded with my abrupt forfeit. After the awards were handed out and the closing ceremony conducted in grand fashion, Himeji and I were summoned to the provost's office via text. I had handed the champion spot to Akizuki without any consultation, despite all the help Ichinose had given me, so I was expecting all kinds of vitriol.

"You know...that old vixen was certainly in a good mood," Himeji remarked quietly as she strode alongside me. Despite my worst fears, the provost couldn't have been happier. She'd whined about her hangover earlier, yet she'd busted

out a vintage during our meeting.

Still, it made sense. My dropping out didn't harm me or Provost Ichinose. Nobody who had witnessed us on stage considered it my loss. Honestly, I would've suffered tons of criticism if I had taken Akizuki on and defeated her. Better to allow her the title. It benefitted everyone.

With all that in mind, I nodded back at Himeji. "She was, yeah. I feel like she's always sneering at me, but she was way more excited than usual."

"You're right. She let some of her true feelings show, and I'm sure triumphing over Provost Kurahashi of the Twelfth Ward has her elated. He was always the subject of sinister rumors, but nobody could ever pin anything on him."

"Yeah, and remember how she said, 'The Board of Regents is sooo gonna owe me now'?" I said, laughing. "I'll let her worry about that stuff."

My relationship with Provost Ichinose could be summed up as "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." I received assistance and financial support from the Company and access to all the data I wanted. The Fourth Ward building up its reputation in exchange wasn't a bad trade.

By the way, the green Unique Star Akizuki had stolen did make its way over to me as a reward for satisfying the provost's job request. That, however, was strictly between me and the provost. The official story was a bit different. To be precise, the fact that Akizuki had stolen the star was kept quiet to spare Eimei's reputation. Instead, the provost awarded that star, the top prize in the 4WC, to me instead of Akizuki, since, in her words, "I don't mind if you make Noa the champ, but if she gets off completely free without any punishment, we might have to deal with more of these shenanigans next year." That was believable enough, and given all the hassle I had gone through, I think I deserved something.

"Heh-heh... You've certainly earned a break, Master." Himeji smiled softly, almost as though she'd read my mind. She faced me as we walked. "I guess you're a Three Star now."

I nodded. "Guess so, yeah."

Three stars. Finally, I was a Three Star. I still had a long way to go if I wanted

to be a legit Seven Star, but at least I was making decent progress. If I continued increasing my rank, maybe I'd find *her* before too long. Perhaps I'd accomplish the one thing I had come to this island to do.

While I languidly thought that over...

"Whoa! ...Um, hee-hee-hee... Funny running into you here, Hiroto! ♪"

...someone ran over at full speed after catching sight of me from a distance. She spun and spread her arms wide to block my way. Noa Akizuki, the Little Devil of Eimei, was back. This was no chance encounter, judging by her panting. Still, she managed to give a smile.

"See? I told you that we're made for each...other... *Hahhh...! Koff koff...* Sorry, one sec..."

"Just catch your breath first, okay?"

"Oh... Thanks, Hiroto..."

Akizuki bent over, clinging to my arms as she tried to gather herself. After a little while, her face shot back up.

"Okay, I'm back! Eh-heh-heh! Sorry to latch on to you like that."

"It's fine... Do you need something? Don't tell me you just happened to be passing by."

"Ah, uh, umm... Yeah, I want to ask you something."

Her expression turned a bit serious. She stared right up at me from point-blank range. "Hiroto, why did you help me?" she asked seriously.

"Why? I told you after the Treasure Hunt Board Game ended, didn't I? I wasn't trying to help you at all. I just wanted to take down the mastermind behind—"

"No, no, I don't mean that. I mean today, when you handed me the championship. Collecting that Libra data, banishing my feelings of inferiority... Eh-heh-heh! You're not actually falling in love with me, are you, Hiroto? 'Cause if so...I could, you know, thank you and stuff."

With her sweetened voice, it was hard to tell whether she was joking or not.

She brought her face so close it nearly touched mine. Her citrus aroma penetrated my nostrils. We were all but embracing each other, and she pressed her chest and legs against me. The sheer sensuality almost made me dizzy, yet at the same time, I saw Himeji frowning at me pointedly.

“...!”

I focused hard, brushing away all my not-so-noble thoughts. Why had I helped Akizuki? As in, why had I both defeated Kurahashi and made her champion? Honestly, simple guilt had played a large part in it, as did all the stuff I’d said on stage. However, there was another reason. I empathized with Akizuki. She had resorted to illegal means at the risk of being shunned by everyone. A lot about her plight matched my own. Perhaps I would’ve accepted a similar sort of deal had I been in a similar place emotionally with no one to turn to.

And...there was one more critical reason.

“You know...you’re a valuable weapon for me.”

“A...a weapon?”

Akizuki blinked at my remark, confused. I didn’t think my point came across too well, so I went into more detail.

“Right, a weapon. Cheating or not, you played really well during the event. Seriously, I thought I might lose more than a couple of times. How could I let someone like you slip through my fingers? I wanted you to owe me a favor. Nothing more and nothing less.”

My cold demeanor was a front. I still needed to conceal plenty from Akizuki, but there was truth to my words. This girl had swiped the green star from Eimei and nearly dominated the 4WC. Illegal Abilities or not, she was a challenging opponent. I’d be in excellent shape if I won her to my side. Akizuki would undoubtedly serve as a vital key to conquering my foes in the upcoming Interward League battles.

“...”

Akizuki fell silent for a bit. Then, in an unexpected turn, she took a hesitant breath.

“Hiroto,” she began timidly. “Do I take that to mean you see value in me? Have I become special to you?”

“Huh? Ah... Well, maybe, yeah.” I nodded, a little unsure about the meaning behind her words. Akizuki was probably going to reply with a grin and a “I knew it! ♡”

“Wow... Eh-heh-heh...”

Contrary to my prediction, she remained fairly reserved. She didn’t raise her voice, instead blushing slightly and giving a bashful smile. It was a cute, unforced one, too. I’d never seen Akizuki like this before, and it was charming. Endearing, even. I averted my eyes slightly so she wouldn’t notice.

“... ”

We stood silently for a moment. Akizuki took action first, pushing a scrap of paper against my body. Looking down, I saw a string of ten or so letters written on it. I frowned.

“Um,” Akizuki muttered. “That’s my device ID. Not my public one, but a private account I share only with reeeeeally important people. I haven’t given it to anybody before... Eh-heh-heh! You’re a special exception. ♪”

“Oh? Uhh... Thanks.”

“Sure! This way, I can say good morning, good night, and welcome back anytime I want, and in the cutest way ever, too. I hope you won’t mind!”

Akizuki grinned shyly, then turned around and ran off without looking back. There was none of that self-conscious cunning this time, which actually made my heart race a bit faster. She really was cute deep down.

“...I see. This is how it begins, then? The classic ‘let’s just be friends first’ approach. I see.”



“ ... ”

Himeji nodded about something next to me while mumbling something, but I was too afraid to inquire about what.

b b

“It’s rare for you to screw up so badly, Mikado.”

“ ... ”

“Here, why don’t you wash your face. You look gross. Not gentlemanly at all. It’s like you killed three people or something.”

“What do you want? This is honestly the first time one of my plans wasn’t even partially successful. I’d have to be crazy not to be angry.”

“Oh, really? Well, you only have yourself to blame. You lost because you’re weak. What was his name? Hiroto Shinohara. You failed to take a star from him, you lost Noa Akizuki, you were forced to step down as provost of Seijo, and you barely escaped alive.”

“Tsk... Yes, yes. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, quit pouting. It’s fine. You only lost your public persona. That hardly hurts you at all. Honestly, Mikado, your situation doesn’t matter to me. The important thing is that Hiroto Shinohara has obtained his third Unique Star. I expect his pace to slow, but if he does manage to become an Eight Star, it will be a serious issue. Are we clear?”

“I know, I know. I’ll crush him next time.”

“Please do, thanks. Oh, but take that other kid with you next time, all right? Because if you mess up again, I won’t take it in such good humor.”

“Roger.”

“Good. Also...that was some pretty interesting information you brought back. Perhaps we could try a more roundabout approach next time. For example...”

###

Saionji contacted me in the evening.

“Hmm?”

I looked at my vibrating device. Saionji sent me whiny texts fairly regularly, but this was one of her rare voice calls. I was just about to turn out the light, so I sat down on my bed and tapped the screen.

“Hello?”

“Ah! Shinohara?! Phew! I don’t know what I’d do if you didn’t pick up.”

“Why’re you shouting at me? Oh, by the way, everything’s wrapped up with the 4WC. The provost awarded me the Unique Star for the good job I did.”

“...Sh-she did? Hmm. Well, how nice. You never keep in contact with me, so I was just wondering how you were doing. Just a little.”

“Oh, yeah? I do talk with you, you know. I sent a message earlier this evening.”

“Huh? ...Oh, you did. Sorry, I didn’t notice it.”

“It’s fine... Rare to see you miss something, though.”

“Maybe. I’m just—Actually, now’s not the time for that. Oh, right! I called because I wanted to talk to you! I’m in real trouble!”

“Trouble? For what?”

Saionji’s antics were puzzling. She was usually so even-tempered, too. Seeing her get this worked up was uncommon. I grew warier, wondering if something had happened. The shock of what she said next easily shattered all my expectations.

“It’s Sarasa! Not me...or the real one, either... A third Sarasa Saionji’s appeared!”

“Huh?”

How do I put this? I wish our lies didn’t come with so many obstacles.

AFTERWORD

Hello, good afternoon, or good evening. This is Haruki Kuou. Thank you very much for picking up *Liar Liar, Vol. 2: The Lying Transfer Student Is Targeted by the Little Devil*.

How did you like it? This volume covered the Fourth Ward Challenge, so it mainly focused on the Fourth Ward, Shinohara's home. I tried to go heavy on the Game and rom-com content (by my standards, anyway), so hopefully you enjoyed all of it. Also, I'll avoid spoiling just in case you flipped to the afterword before reading, but I'm starting to really like the new character that showed up, so writing for her constantly kept me excited.

Now it's time for a quick announcement. This will be advertised on Twitter and other social media outlets about a month before this volume comes out, so a lot of you might already know this, but *Liar Liar* has been picked up for a manga adaptation! Yes! A manga! A manga! (This is important, so I wrote it twice!)

Manga... Those two little syllables were all it took to give me a sense of euphoria. I can't stop grinning. In fact, I haven't stopped since the moment I heard about the project and got some rough sketches of the character designs. (I'm a creep, I know.) It hasn't even been two years since I realized my dream of becoming a professional light novel author, and already I've made my next goal come true... It really is like a dream, and I'm genuinely overjoyed. I definitely want to keep it going, and I've got a lot of other dreams I want to see fulfilled. To that end, I'll keep plugging away at this thing!

Now for some thanks.

First, I want to thank konomi for continuing the streak of excellent illustrations from the first volume. The cover, insert, and interior images are all so wonderful that I lack the vocabulary to describe them. When I saw the design

for the new character, something inside me woke up... I love it so much. Thanks!

Thanks also to Funa Yukina, who will be handling the manga version. As the story writer and a reader, I'm super looking forward to the manga. It'll be great to work with you!

Thanks to my editor and everyone else at MF Bunko J editorial. You were a huge help with this volume, just as with the last, and I'm sure you will be during the next book, too. Hopefully, we can keep this good thing going (he said, ominously).

Finally, the greatest thanks go to all those who read this story. Between the next volume and the manga version, *Liar Liar* is expanding more and more. I hope you'll keep up with us! See you later!

Haruki Kuou

Liar, Liar, Volume 2

The Lying Transfer Student Is Targeted

by the Little Devil

HUH?

Hello! This is konomi,
from the Kinokonomi group.

I was snorting with
glee whenever I
drew Noa acting
all sly. ♪ She's
small, but really
big, too!!! Small,
but big!!!

Funa Yukina's
handling the
manga version! ✧✧
Funa's girls are
really cute and
jiggly. I can't
stand it! Can't
wait, either! ♪

Special ✧
thank

Haruki Kuou

My editor

Tatsuya Yuuki

Funa Yukina

and you!

thanxxx

no-
kono-
lose





A third Sarasa Saionji has appeared!
Meanwhile, things with Hiroto, Himeji,
and Rina begin heating up!

COMING SOON!

③ ***Liar,
Liar***



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